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# Mobile Revolution:

How Migrant Workers in China Use Social Media to Defend Their Rights

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, the level of rights awareness and labor unrest has been heightened through the sharing of activism knowledge and experiences across different regions of China and of the world. This is made possible by the surge of technological developments in China that took place in the past two decades. With information communication technologies (ICTs), such as the Internet and the mobile phone, the younger generation of migrants is able to access information and learn about their own rights. Additionally, ICTs are helpful in organizing spontaneous protests and bringing about social change. Finally, technology usage allows for people with different backgrounds from various sectors of society to connect and work together in the fight for workers' rights. Whether it is migrants collaborating with professionals to seek legal redress or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) sharing organizing strategies, the crucial role technology plays in China's contemporary labor activism scene is indisputable. In other words, ICTs have obliterated spatial-temporal boundaries so everyone can be unified and accessible in a way that has never been possible before. This study combines reports on the working conditions in the manufacturing sector, accounts of the technological development in China, literature on migrants' daily usage of technology, and my own primary research to examine the effects of technology on China's labor activism landscape.

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*“This revolution, the information revolution, is a revolution of free energy as well, but of another kind: free intellectual energy. It's very crude today, yet our Macintosh computer takes less power than a 100-watt bulb to run it and it can save you hours a day. What will it be able to do ten or 20 years from now, or 50 years from now?”*

*– Steve Jobs 1985*

## **Introduction**

In 2010, eighteen young Chinese factory workers – all between the ages of 17 and 25 – attempted suicide at Foxconn facilities across Mainland China. Most of them leaped from dormitory buildings, while one cut his wrist after failing to jump. Previously known as Hon Hai Precision Industry, Foxconn is a Taiwanese company that fine-tunes and assembles products primarily for Apple, but also for other electronic giants such as Microsoft, HP, Dell, Samsung, Nintendo, and Amazon. With 1.4 million employees working in China alone, Foxconn stands as the world’s largest industrial corporation. By December 2011, the number of suicide attempts in its factories had reached twenty-four. Of those, 20 died (Pun and Chan 2013, 2).

Both the Chinese and Western press soon began to report these incidents, coining the term “suicide express” to convey the frightening regularity of worker deaths. Naturally, such stories caught international attention. Public discussions about corporate management, workers’ treatment, and global supply chain labor responsibility quickly intensified in television, newspapers, and the blogosphere. Foxconn responded to public scrutiny by installing safety nets between the dormitory buildings to prevent more employees from jumping off the rooftops (see figure 1). Blaming the deaths on the workers’ “own emotional problems,” factory senior management invited professional psychologists for consultations and set up a 24-hour suicide hotline service (Chan 2010, 1-6).

I first learned about the suicide incidents in a college cultural anthropology course in the spring of 2012. Having moved from China to the U.S. when I was 10 years old, I felt a visceral connection to the happenings in my home country. More than anything, I was deeply confused by why young people were ending their lives. Who were these workers? What

pushed them into taking such desperate acts? What drew them to the factory life in the first place? Who were the main actors in China's supply chain, and what were their roles, logics, and relations with one another?

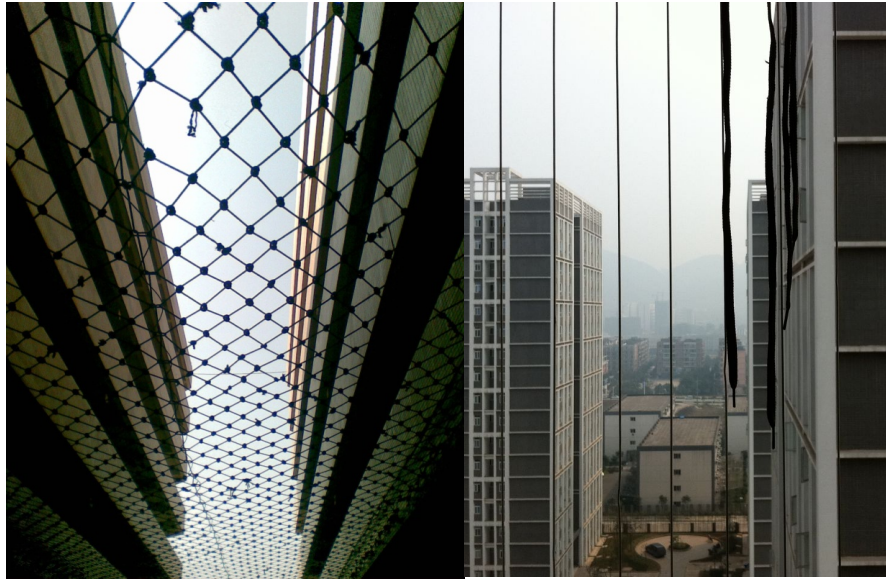


Figure 1. Anti-suicide nets and barred windows installed in Foxconn facilities.  
*Source: Dying for an iPhone (2014), 30.*

Upon initial exposure, I learned that these workers who jumped off buildings were internal migrants; they belonged to a massive group of 262 million people who had moved from the countryside to the city in search for a better life. However, the contradiction stands that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) both initiated the migration movement and made the migrants' lives in the city full of daily social and political discrimination. Mass migration in China is not new; as early as the 1950s the state regularly directed mass mobilization for national initiatives (i.e. economic advancement). However, in the course of my research in China, it became clear to me that I was interacting with a younger generation of migrant workers who seemed to differ significantly from the first wave of migrants. Most of the post-1980s generation of migrant workers grew up in the city and are more educated than their

parents. They are also driven by different goals and are more knowledgeable about how to attain such goals.

For most Western readers, no one has told the story of China's new urban workers more powerfully than journalist Leslie Chang. In the 2009 best seller *Factory Girls*, Chang details the lives of several self-aware young women, their aspiration for upward social mobility, and the personal costs of their individual advancement. She focuses on workers in Dongguan, a boomtown in Guangdong Province full of mega-factories producing garments, shoes, and computer disk drives. She depicts their daily lives through the lens of self-empowerment in a new China where opportunities are ubiquitous. She effectively avoids the cliché of representing the migrant population as a faceless mass by offering intimate accounts of the main characters, Min and Chunming. Throughout the course of Chang's account, readers come to see these two women as dynamic individuals with complicated lives. They work grueling hours, take English classes, shop for clothes and accessories, fall in love, and learn about the world while discovering themselves. Utilizing the Internet, text messages, and voice calls, these tech-savvy youth undergo a wide variety of experiences from exciting romances to strained familial relationships. Each has her own sorrows, her own aspirations.

In the book, Chang offers a libertarian, free-market view of "empowered" young women who have forsaken their Confucian bedrock and replaced the patriarchal chains of traditional Chinese culture for an improvised and exciting lifestyle in the city, where individualism is the golden rule and prosperity is the only objective. "If it was an ugly world," she concludes, "at least it was their own" (383). She encourages us to see China's factory labor not as a form of exploitation, but as a new path created for the impoverished rural population to achieve economic success. However, this is not the entire story. In fact,

Chang neglects to tell much of the darker side of the migrants' situation in China. For instance, Dongguan is known as China's "sin city," due to its reputation for hosting the most developed sex industry. Ten percent of its population is believed to work in prostitution (Phillips 2013). The majority of these sex workers are young female migrants. Chang inexplicably excludes an entire population of young female workers from her narrative.

Moreover, while Chang's attention to the individual transformation of migrant women remains uplifting, she ultimately oversimplifies the situation. For instance, her suggestions for possible changes within factories themselves do not take into account systemic issues that drive worker exploitation. Chang stated in a 2012 TED Talk that she would advise Apple executives to offer English classes and computer training to self-motivated workers in China. Her narrative that equating workers' daily struggles with self-betterment is appealing to those without extensive knowledge of the realities of China's social landscape. It provides an escape from the consumerist guilt of creating and perpetuating the global supply chain for cheap goods. However, in doing so, her analysis of the deeply flawed system that relentlessly exploits Chinese migrant workers becomes overly optimistic and even naïve in some regards. By portraying the youths as voluntarily migrating to work 12-hour shifts for meager wages in horrendous factory conditions, Chang neglects the sociological factors at the root of China's labor problems.

In a 2013 blog post, labor scholar and activist Jenny Chan criticizes the oblivion underlying *Factory Girls*. Calling it a "feel-good, happy worker story," Chan points to the systemic factors that ultimately drive the prevailing injustice against migrant workers in China. Leslie Chang is not the only one who engages with and consequentially propagates this overly optimistic type of narrative. Everyone who attempts to tell the story of migrants in



China is caught up in the complex politics and ethics of representation, forced to make decisions about what to include and what to exclude. I am not excluded from this decision, as in my thesis I am also implicitly choosing certain aspects on which to focus. For the most part, however, I would like to challenge what I believe is the liberal journalists' problematic form of erasure. What I found in my research is an overwhelming level of exploitation of the migrant labor force. Young people from the countryside are directed by state policies that deny them equal access to many welfare, health, education, and retirement benefits. The deliberately imbalanced labor policies that favor corporations over workers and economic advancements over individual rights create an entire class of second-tier citizens who are entangled in vectors of social, political and economic pressure. Thus, even though factory employment is a better option for migrants than the alternative lifestyle in the countryside, I find myself outraged by the status quo.

My thesis, which explores how technology usage is producing new forms of labor activism in China, combines reports on the working conditions in the manufacturing sector, accounts of the technological development in China, literature on migrants' daily usage of technology, and my own ethnographic field notes. I begin with a historical overview of the mass migration that drove millions of people from the countryside to the city. This background is crucial to begin to grasp on the struggles of young migrants. In Chapter One, I rely on the unpublished manuscript of scholars/activists Pun Ngai and Jenny Chan, *Dying for an iPhone*, to examine Foxconn workers' conditions on the factory floor as well as in their dorms. I also analyze the corporate-state collaboration that gains from exploiting migrant laborers. In the multilayered network of corporate interests and state power, China's national trade union and labor dispute system are structurally incentivized against advocating for

workers rights. Finally, I look at how young migrant workers in the industrial sector are beginning to define and defend their rights through collective forms of protest. Chapter Two covers the rising use in China of information and communication technologies (ICTs), specifically the Internet and the mobile phone. Predominantly drawing from Jack Qiu's *Working-Class Network Society* (2009) and Cara Wallis' *Technomobility in China* (2013), I explore how ICTs both empower and disempower migrants. The chapter ends with examples of how ICT access gave rise to new ways of bringing about grassroots social change. Chapter Three delves into the various types of labor activists in China. Some of these activists are former workers, some of them are concerned professionals (e.g. journalists, academics, and lawyers), and some of them are college students with migrant status. Relying on my own field notes, I look at their individual roles in advocating for workers' rights. Finally, I study how social media help to establish trans-regional networks that allow activists to share organizing strategies and experiences.

My research relies on both primary and secondary sources to evaluate and understand the mosaic of the present-day labor activism landscape. Migrant labor is often discussed through a national or global lens, with very little emphasis placed on regional differences within China. However, provincial variations of culture, economy, and political leadership all play significant roles in how migrant labor issues are governed and addressed, especially considering the deep alliance between business and municipal governments.

With this in mind, I embarked on my journey in the summer of 2013 to conduct research in six different cities throughout China - Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Guangdong, Ningbo, Chengdu, and Beijing. These places are spread out across the nation, varying from a special administrative region (Hong Kong), to a special economic zone (Shenzhen), to

China's interior land (Chengdu), to the capital (Beijing, where all the crucial decisions are made at the national policy level). My aim was to consider the migrant labor activism movement as a whole, looking at how people from different sectors of society work together for the common goal of improving worker conditions. Thus I have conducted my own interviews with migrant workers, students, scholars, and NGO workers. The factory workers' names and identifying details have been changed to protect their privacy.

The most significant of my findings is that the sharing of activism knowledge and experience across different regions of China and of the world heightens the levels of rights awareness and labor unrest. This sharing is made possible by the surge of technological developments in China that took place in the past two decades. With information communication technologies (ICTs), such as the Internet and the mobile phone, the new generation of migrants is able to access information and learn about their own rights. Additionally, ICTs are helpful in organizing spontaneous protests, thereby bringing about social change. Finally, technology usage allows for people with different backgrounds from various sectors of society to connect and work together in the fight for workers' rights. Whether by enabling migrants to collaborate with professionals to seek legal redress or NGOs to share organizing strategies, the crucial role technology plays in China's contemporary labor activism scene is indisputable. This project will add to the existing scholarship on China's labor activism and technology usage by bridging these two subjects and analyzing their interplay. Beyond this academic contribution, I hope to produce research that will in turn help promote labor activism.

## **Historical Overview**

In order to begin to comprehend Chinese young migrants' struggles, it is crucial to first understand China's past, especially the aspects of history that have direct relevance to the contemporary milieu. The following historical overview, which focuses on national developments since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), begins with an introduction to the household registration system, its functions, and the process by which millions of people were forcibly relocated for state-directed projects during Mao's era to help develop industrial China. The second section goes on to outline the main policies and events of the post-Mao or Reform era that began in 1978, as well as their lasting effects. It looks at the rural-urban divide perpetuated by official regulations, the first wave of mass migration from farm to city, the form of lives these migrants led, and the existing literature on this population of relocated peasants. During this period, the primary driving force behind residence policy reforms was economic, as the state moved millions of people out of financially insignificant jobs on the land and into factories and onto building sites in the city. One central topic this overview explores is the alarming capacity of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to institutionalize the collective power of its citizens as a vast resource to help advance China – first in industrial development, then in economic growth. The CCP's social regulations were carefully crafted to work in tandem with the economic policies to produce the optimum domain for labor exploitation. Such actions stood in stark contradiction to the ideologically driven CCP narrative, focused on the celebration of the rural population's contributions to the state.

## **I. The Founding of a New Nation**

The use of records in China has always played a pivotal role in the accession of new regimes to power. Histories recount that when Han armies took over the Qin capital and established their state in 206 B.C., the first thing the new chief of staff did was not to loot the national treasures, but to secure its records (Dutton 2008, 114). Little has changed two millennia later. In fact, the importance of everyday household records was heightened ten years after the establishment of the PRC in 1949, as authorities adopted the *hukou* or “household registration” system that denoted everyone’s area of permanent residence. Thereafter, the state regularly directed mass mobilization for its own, often economic, initiatives.

### ***Beginning of the Hukou System***

In the early 1950s, citizens were allowed the freedom of traveling and changing their residence with just a simple registration at the Public Security Bureau. During this time, official regulation was largely erratic, fragmented, and ineffective, and the state merely monitored changes in population distribution without much interference. Thus from 1949 to 1957, the development of labor-intensive industries drove 20 million rural laborers into the cities to find employment. In those days, migrants were not treated as a distinct population, and there were neither special control nor legal regulation in place just for them. Neutral terms such as *yimin* were used to refer to relocated peasants (Zhang 2002, 25).

However, such large-scale migration soon came to be seen as an urgent national problem. The city could not fully absorb all the migrants, which exacerbated the problem of urban unemployment. Moreover, some experts and officials believed that industrialization

required the rural population to stay on farmlands to continue to produce food for those industry workers. As a result, CCP leaders began to seek control of this group of peasants through an ambitious registration system. On one hand, they wanted to block the flow of migrants to avoid overpopulating the metropolises, but on the other, they sought to direct labor forces toward key industrial targets. The ultimate goal was to confine people's spatial mobility and maintain socialist stability (Feng 1997, 150-151).

When China's first Five-Year Plan – a series of social and economic development initiatives – swung into operation in 1953, so did its *hukou* policy. In 1955, the State Council formulated a preliminary structure of household registration with elaborate procedures that required citizens to apply for permission to migrate. Three years later, the National People's Congress began to strictly impose the *hukou* system and mandated that every Chinese citizen register at birth with local authorities as either a rural (agricultural) or an urban (non-agricultural) *hukou* holder of a particular fixed place. Rural *hukou* were distributed to each *she* or “cooperative,” a team of families who pooled their lands to create larger fields that could yield greater output. This policy bound peasants not just to their families, but also to entire rural social units controlled by the communist cadre network. In contrast, urban *hukou* were issued to each household, and every household was tied to a workplace. Since everyone was assigned jobs by the state labor bureau, the city populace stabilized around *danwei* or “work units” and neighborhood communities. As a result, the register restricted people's mobility to specific areas and became an essential tool that the state planners used to identify where human resources were located (Mackenzie 2002, 307-308).

Above all, the distinction between urban and rural *hukou* created new types of inclusion and exclusion by essentially dividing the population into two kinds of subjects with

unequal resources. Those with the rural *hukou* were prohibited from living in cities. Beyond that, the stringent system of financial rationing meant that peasants were also not entitled to receive urban employment, subsidized housing, food, medical care, and other benefits of the city. Basic staples (e.g. grain, cotton, cooking oil, milk, sugar, and meat) could only be bought with rationing certificates that were exclusive to those with a city *hukou*. Since the government assigned all jobs, each work unit was responsible for providing every urban employee with housing. Non-locals who tried to migrate to the city would thus be left homeless and jobless. In the following two decades, the household registration policy was firmly enforced, as the police often harassed and deported those who attempted to migrate without authorization. Thus non-state-directed population movements were mostly eliminated (Zhang 2002, 24).

### ***Mao's Mass Campaigns***

The *hukou* policy that would have cut off all rural-to-urban migration was suspended during the Great Leap Forward in 1959 and 1960, when the state leader Chairman Mao Zedong pushed for a bold new project that was designed to hasten China's industrialization process. People in the urban area prioritized industrialization (e.g. building factories, transportation and communication enterprises), while the rural population served as the agricultural base that fed the entire country. Nineteen million rural workers were recruited to increase crop yields. At the end of this unsuccessful attempt dominated by ill-informed and foolish legislative decisions, full-blown famine broke out in China (Wasserstrom 2010, 55-56). This manmade nightmare was most severe in rural areas, especially in inland provinces such as Sichuan, Guizhou, and Anhui. Millions fled to major cities to escape starvation.

However, the cities themselves were battling food shortages, and between 1961 and 1963, 50 million rural migrants were deported back to the countryside. The state then further tightened its control over peasants' mobility (Naughton 2007, 71-72).

The Great Leap Forward temporarily cost Mao his position as China's paramount leader. As an effort to reclaim his position of centrality, Mao led a very different kind of state-directed, politically driven population movement. The Cultural Revolution was a political upheaval from 1966 to 1976 intended to bring about a return to revolutionary Maoist beliefs. Millions of urban youth and intellectuals were sent down to the countryside to be 'reeducated' by humble peasants (Wasserstrom 2010, 57). The state relocated many skilled urban workers and professionals to underdeveloped border provinces, especially to minority autonomous regions (e.g. Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and the Tibetan Plateau) to promote economic and technological development in the frontier areas. Interestingly, such large-scale displacements of urban people were not seen as population movements, but rather as political events termed with highly politicized labels, such as *shangshan jiaxiang* ("sending of urban youth up the mountains and down to the countryside") and *zhibian* ("supporting the border areas"). Unlike their peasant counterparts, the city people involved in these movements during the Cultural Revolution were not seen as representations of distinct social categories subjugated by special regulations (Zhang 2002, 26).

## II. China in the Reform Era

*"It doesn't matter whether a cat is white or black. As long as it catches mice, it's a good cat."* — Deng Xiaoping, 1961.

After Mao's death in 1976, situations in China changed dramatically. A new wave of rhetoric seized the nation, as leader Deng Xiaoping embarked on radical economic reforms.



Deng's "black cat, white cat" pragmatism emphasized merit, material wealth, and consumption. It repudiated Maoist frugality and austerity, and undermined the CCP's moral authority. Special Economic Zones (SEZ)<sup>1</sup> in the coastal regions were carved out to welcome international investment with favorable policies. Government stances were loosened to promote migration that would fulfill urgent demands for cheap labor in these location, and everyone cherished Deng's motto: "To get rich is glorious!" Yet, not everyone benefited equally from China's entry into the global market economy. While the CCP strove to induce a 'trickle-down' effect, where if the country becomes prosperous and strong, citizens' lives will improve accordingly, uneven development proved problematic. Amidst the rapidly growing urban economy existed an exorcized population battling against social discrimination, struggling to survive (Wasserstrom 2010, 70).

### ***First Generation of Migrants: 1980s to 1990s***

Deng's 1978 Reform and Opening Up<sup>2</sup> policies was a departure from Maoism. It promoted "socialism with Chinese characteristics," economic system in which the state would still control much of the market but also allow foreign investments and decentralization of national industries. In fact, with the emergence of free markets for consumer goods, the government set up tax systems favorable for privatization of enterprises to encourage investments. The number of state-owned enterprises dramatically declined in

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<sup>1</sup> A Special Economic Zone (SEZ) is a designated area in countries that possess special economic regulations that are different from other areas in the same country. These regulations contain measures that are conducive to foreign direct investment, allowing for tax incentives and the opportunity to pay lower tariffs. China first established SEZs in 1980, as the Communist Party permitted capitalism on a trail basis in Shenzhen, Xiamen, Shantou, and Zhuhai. These cities, all on the southern coast of China, were chosen because sea is very accessible for transportation of goods.

<sup>2</sup> 改革开放 or *gai ge kai fang*

the 1990s, and consequentially the percentage of workers in state-owned industries also dropped (see figure 2). As China became integrated into the world economy, new identities and life opportunities arisen. With increasing freedom of choosing their own careers, most urban residents pursued opportunities in novel fields and rejected labor-intensive jobs in the manufacturing and construction sectors. These jobs, regarded as ‘low-skilled’ and ‘dirty,’ were thus available for the rural population (Pai 2013, 5). Consequently, the CCP dismantled many mechanisms of state planning and social control that had existed during Mao’s era, and relaxed the migration restrictions. The collapse of the state-monopolized markets also allowed migrants to obtain basic resources and services through monetary exchange in the cities (Wasserstrom 2010, 70). All these conditions enabled the beginnings of China’s first wave mass internal migration. The relocated peasants soon became the “new mobile proletariat” who circulated from one city to the next in search of work (Pai 2012, 5).

<b>Figure 2. Industrial Employment in State-Owned Industries</b>			
<b>Year</b>	Total number of industrial workers employed (10,000 persons)	Number of industrial workers employed in state-owned industries (10,000 persons)	Workers in state-owned industries (%)
<b>1995</b>	6610	4397	66.52
<b>1996</b>	6450	4378	66.33
<b>1997</b>	6215	4040	65.00
<b>1998</b>	4753	2712	57.06
<b>1999</b>	4428	2412	54.47
<b>2000</b>	4102	2096	51.10
<b>2001</b>	3838	1824	47.52
<b>2002</b>	3729	1546	41.46

Source: Data from National Bureau of Statistics 2002, section 13-2.

Meanwhile, reforms in the countryside were largely in the interest of developing the cities and bringing China’s economy to a global level. In 1979, the communes that had dominated life in the countryside for more than 20 years were disbanded. Instead, farming

was now done at the household rather than the collective level, and farmers were allowed to keep or sell a certain portion of their produce on the free market. As township and village enterprises emerged, 57 million new jobs were created from 1978 to 1986 alone (Oi 1999, 790).

However, after a few years of initial growth in agricultural production, rural income began to decline. While land was contracted out to individual rural households, the amount given to each family was very limited and not enough to support everyone. A lack of incentives to develop the countryside and heavy taxation widened the gap between the rich and the poor and once again depressed the peasants to the bottom of the society. The rural population suffered from heavy taxation while the local party bureaucrats profited hugely from the increasingly commercialized rural economy. Greater agricultural efficiency further resulted in surplus farm laborers. Consequently, 200 million peasants could no longer depend on the land for a living. About half of them became workers in newly developing village enterprises, while the other half left their rural homes in search for a living in urban areas (Pai 2012, 3).

In short, the combination of profound economic reform, urban development, rural income decline, emergence of new urban jobs, and loosening of laws that limit population mobility brought mass migration to rise on a scale unprecedented in modern China.

### ***Second Tier Citizenship: the 2000s***

Censuses in the early 2000s estimated a ‘floating’ population of nearly 150 million.<sup>3</sup> While the temporary resident status granted migrants a partial right to work and live in the cities, it continued to deny them access to state-sponsored goods and services, which were still heavily tied to specific locations. As a result, China became increasingly socially stratified both in terms of regional disparities (rural-urban inequalities) and urban inequalities (intra-city inequalities). Residents of prosperous cities such as Beijing and Shanghai enjoyed far superior and more diverse services than those of the rural areas (Mackenzie 2002, 305 and 312-314). Moreover, migrants living in those cities were denied leisure spaces: their long work hours and low salary inevitably lead to “isolated lives” (Wallis 2013, 38).

This sub-citizen status made the migrant population acutely vulnerable to police and government mistreatment. It became common practice for the public security bureaus to physically segregate migrant workers from the rest of society as a way to ensure ‘public safety.’ In public spaces such as the Guangdong train stations, peasants were regularly placed in special lines to be dealt with separately (Pai 2013, 62). In Beijing, an entire migrant village housing thousands of workers was deemed illegal and demolished by authorities (Wallis 2013, 38). These examples demonstrate that the rural workers suffered relentless exploitation, as the state encouraged them to remain a central, but invisible, labor power in China’s cities. State slogans such as ‘leave the land but not the villages, enter the factories but not the cities’ sum up attitudes fostered toward the migrants (Miller 2012, 12).

The gradual erosion of the power of the *hukou* was cultivated by the CCP to supplement its reform policies aimed to accelerate China’s economic growth. While this development strategy accomplished an economic miracle, it also deepened distribution

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<sup>3</sup> Accurate numbers of migrants are notoriously difficult to obtain, since the word “migrant” can hold several different meanings.

inequalities and effectively institutionalized the denial of some of the most basic rights and services to a large group of workers. The state repeatedly shaped population movements in ways that served the interests of the powerful at the expense of the poor. It has been roughly 60 years since the founding of the PRC; the class of people once praised by Mao as a revolutionary vanguard now constantly struggles to survive at the very bottom of a society controlled by a party that seems to have abandoned them once again.

### ***Social Discrimination Against the ‘Floating’ Population***

By the end of the 1990s, China’s roughly 130 million migrant workers served in a variety of ‘low-educated’ job positions in places such as factories, restaurants, construction sites, elevators, delivery services, housecleaning, and garbage-collection. Compared to the urbanites, rural workers were willing to take opportunities at lower wages and with fewer benefits. Employers soon realized the advantages of hiring them as cheap labor (Mackenzie 2002, 309). In major cities like Beijing and Shanghai, migrants made up a quarter of the population, and together, they accounted for the biggest mass migration in human history (Chang 2008, 12). However, even under this new climate, relocated peasants – facing both social and state discrimination – found it impossible to be truly integrated into cities.

While the official state language refers to migrant workers as *liudongrenkou* (“a floating population”), the colloquial word more often used by everyday city residents is *mangliu* (“an unregulated flow of people”). *Mangliu*, literally “blind flow,” is a derogatory term coined in the early 1950s when the state-controlled media, *The People’s Daily*, began to describe the rural-to-urban-migration as “blindly leaving the countryside.” This term came into wider use in the 1980s and 1990s, capturing the migrants’ sense of desperation and lack of direction in

a world where the cards were and continue to be hopelessly stacked against them (Pai 2013, 5).

A closer look at Chinese language use reflects the discrimination embedded in the vocabulary used to describe the migrant population. The word *liudong* or “floating” has two interpretations: one is to be “lively and unencumbered,” and the other is to be “rootless, unstable, and dangerous” (Zhang 2002, 33). Due to its relationship with related residual terms – *liumin* or “refugee,” *liukou* or “bandits,” *liucuan* or “to flee,” *liudu* or “pernicious influence,” *liufang* or “exiles,” and *liumang* or “hooligans” – *liudong* carries negative connotations. What is more, the word *mangliu* is a transposition of the sounds in the term *liumang* (Zhang 2002, 33). Such language shows a deep-seated ideological reluctance to regard migrants as part of China’s urban working class.

Further cultural implications of “floating” come from the dominant sense of territorial identity prevalent throughout China. Confucian ideology sees rootedness, as opposed to spatial mobility, as the normal state of being. Confucius’ texts idealize spatially bounded social life and portray such stability as the most desirable and moral way of life. Dating back to imperial China, merchant activities, education-related special movements, and pilgrimages largely were all limited to a relatively small stratum of people in coastal areas. For this reason, itinerant people of that time were widely perceived as ghostlike “soul stealers” who brought trouble to stable, rooted communities. In early modern China, since people without land or jobs were believed to form secret societies that challenged the existing social order, the state often considered them to be unstable and dangerous forces. In this context, designating the internal migrants as ‘floating’ conjures a host of prejudices against the rural population that only strengthened as more people flowed into the city (Zhang 2002, 34).

### ***State Regulation of Migrant Subjects***

The social disparities that exist today in China between rural and urban populations are by no means accidental. Deng's pragmatic reform policies were considered morally inferior to Mao's egalitarian philosophies, and the CCP leaders during the Reform era even publicly acknowledged that inequality would ensue from Deng's new strategies. They argued that the wealth would eventually spread and advocated for laws necessary to regulate people's actions (Wallis 2013, 49).

Everyday forms of state control made migrants conform to a subject position as 'secondary citizens' in modern China. Beginning in the mid-1980s, a quasi-legal category was created to register migrants in cities, marking them as a distinct kind of person. Subsequently in the early 1990s, peasants nationwide had to apply for a temporary *hukou* from the local police station for stays longer than a month. In the summer of 1995, the Public Security Bureau enacted the first official stipulation demanding all migrants above the age of 16 to register with local authorities when staying at a place other than their own designated *hukou* residence. That same year, the CCP established a special branch office to oversee the regulation of migrants (Mackenzie 2002, 310).

In spite of these elaborate new policies, however, millions of internal migrants assimilate into cities. While the central government strove to improve regulation and obtain demographic records, such efforts were poorly implemented and lower-level administrators were often more interested in establishing arbitrary registration fees to generate more revenue. Out of frustration at the unreasonable expenses and time consumption, a number of migrants simply avoided the process altogether (Mackenzie 2002, 312). The *hukou* system

essentially created legal barriers and social divisions that perpetuated a cycle of poverty for migrant workers, who were treated as sub-citizens in their own country.



## **Chapter One: The Migrant Worker's Daily Reality**

The “Made in China” labels on our everyday products have long been a topic of discussion among international economists, journalists, and politicians. Through making everything from cheap clothing to high-tech electronics, China advanced as the manufacturing powerhouse bringing unprecedented change not only to its citizens, but also to hundreds of millions of people across the globe. However, the series of worker suicides that occurred in 2010 at Foxconn facilities across Mainland China has prompted the world to finally face the question we can no longer ignore: who are the men and women paying the human price for our ‘China price?’

The following chapter, which first provides a general background to the labor scene in contemporary China, begins with an introduction to the manufacturing sector in China’s export economy. Using Foxconn as a prototype, I examine the conditions on factory floors as well as in workers’ dormitories. The next section includes an analysis of the state’s role. I specifically look at the CCP’s relations with corporations and government policies regarding the national labor union as well as labor disputes. Finally, this chapter concludes with an introduction to the central population of this thesis: the new, post-1980s generation of migrants. In addressing how these younger workers differ from their migrant parents, I weave together media analysis, expert theories, and my own field notes. The final section explores the phenomenon of labor unrest as it appeared and blossomed from the early 2000s until now. It analyzes the change at work and the shape of things to come for China’s migrant community.

## **I. China as the “World Factory”**

Over the past three decades, China’s share of global manufacturing has risen faster than that of any other country. In 2005, China replaced Japan as the world’s third largest exporter after America and Germany. Its total goods trade (including both exports and imports) amounted to 64% of GDP, far more than other large economies, which have trade to GDP ratios of around 20%. Most of the recent trade liberalization reforms began when China formally joined the World Trade Organization at the end of 2001 (Naughton 2007, 377).

On an individual level, products from China have undoubtedly become an essential part of almost every aspect of daily life in the United States. By one estimate, products made in China have saved the average American family \$500 a year (Harney 2009, 4). In 2007, journalist Sara Bongiorni was among numerous authors who published books on the effects of China’s growing economy. In *A Year Without China*, Bongiorni documents her family’s attempt to boycott Chinese made products. She describes the countless difficulties that arose, including the challenge to appease her kids during birthdays and Christmas when 95% of all decorations and nearly 100% of all stuffed toys are made in China. With reactions ranging from admiration to panic, consumers the world over have been affected by China’s overwhelming advancement.

However, instability within China has also been brewing as its citizens experience increasingly drastic income disparities. According to data from Forbes, China had 960,000 millionaires by 2010, and 95 billionaires by 2012 (Kroll 2012). Under 1 percent of households control more than 70 percent of their nation’s private financial wealth, making it the 27<sup>th</sup> most unequal country according to CIA’s World Factbook (Garofalo 2012). Thus while China awes the world with its astonishing GDP, reports generally fail to mention the

hidden class of migrant workers who labor upwards to 72 hours a week to support the new big player in the global economy. The 262 million individuals who make up the core of the working class still lack social security despite the CCP's ideological promise to empower proletariats. These workers are barely making ends meet. The uneven transition of workers' social welfare from a government-based entitlement to a corporate-guided legal right has led to a general deterioration of workers' livelihoods<sup>4</sup>. In the past 30 years, it has become apparent that Deng's system of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" has become merely a variant of the brutal capitalist order that the Communists once denounced. China's export-oriented economic model fostered the rise of numerous manufacturers that are quickly becoming contractors and sub-contractors to foreign multinationals. The mobile proletariat continues to be exploited, moving from city to city, struggling to survive and barely subsisting in this global market economy (Harney 2009, 8).

### ***Meeting Foxconn Workers in Shenzhen***

On June 28, 2013, I visited the Longhua Foxconn plant on the outskirts of Shenzhen, Guangdong, in Southern China.<sup>5</sup> Since the early 2000s, the Taiwan-based manufacturing

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<sup>4</sup> In pre-1980s-reform China, social security – including childcare, education, job placement, housing, subsistence, health care, and elder care – was primarily dependent on the “iron rice bowl” of state-owned enterprises. However, with the growth of private economy, employers are required by law to contribute to workers' social security. In practice, however, the most migrant workers are cheated out of their employment benefits due to inadequate execution of the law.

<sup>5</sup> Thirty years, the city of Shenzhen did not exist; the region merely contained a string of small fishing villages and rice paddies. However, due to its geographical proximity to Hong Kong's port, Shenzhen was chosen by the central government in 1980 to become China's first SEZ. Along with the influx of foreign investment, the number of migrant workers has also increased dramatically. Today, it houses roughly 100,000 factories and 12.4 million people, with migrants significantly outnumbering local residents (“special economic zone (SEZ)” 2014).

giant has been expanding rapidly. A new 12.5-mile Longhua Metro Line opened in June 2011; it extends straight to the factory facilities (Pun and Chan 2014, 54). In fact, the plant has become such a crucial corporation for the city – bringing in millions of people, jobs, and revenue – that the areas surrounding the actual factories have essentially been taken over by the corporation as well. “We call it ‘Foxconn City’ or ‘iPod city,’” one worker later informed me. In addition to the factories, the entire 1.16 square mile region includes warehouses, high-rise dormitories, banks, two hospitals, a postal office, a fire brigade, an exclusive television network, an educational institute, a library, a book store, soccer fields, basketball courts, track and field, swimming pools, cyber cafés, theatres, clothing shops, technology stores, supermarkets, cafeterias, and restaurants (Pun and Chan 2014, 5). ‘Foxconn City’ hosts a total of 300,000 workers (Pun and Chan 2014, 25).

On the day of my visit, the air was heavy with dust and the sky a gloomy gray. Arriving at 5 PM, I was just in time for the first shift of employees to get off work. Thousands of young people in color-coded Polo uniforms poured out of the south gate. They held up their IDs to check out as they passed the guards. They then swarmed across the street, where food vendors had set up a variety of barbecue stalls, fried rice carts, and egg crepe booths. I snaked along the sidewalk for some time before spotting a group of three females in red Polos huddling around a greasy plastic table. Claspings a bowl of fried rice and eggs, I pulled up a plastic stool from the neighboring table and joined the group. These girls were about my age. Upon hearing me introduce myself, one of them left immediately, perhaps out of discomfort of chatting with strangers or just tiredness from working. The other two seemed slightly reserved, but soon opened up as we began chatting.

In a southern accent, Xiao Qin explained that she followed a friend to Shenzhen in 2009 after graduating from high school in rural Sichuan province. Her first job was in a small electronics factory that made circuit boards. She was responsible for gluing on transistors, earning the equivalent of \$190 a month. A year later, she transferred to Foxconn, where she worked up to become a mid-level assembly-line spot inspector who checked phone screens for scratches. Her salary increased to \$220 (¥1,400) a month, including overtime pay. Automatic monthly deductions include roughly \$20 for rent, \$20 for social insurance, and \$15 for housing. The rest she spends on cell phone charges, snacks, and clothes. “I don’t need to send money home usually,” she told me through a guilty grin, “my older brother takes care of that.”

The other worker introduced herself as Fang Mei. Born into a farming family in 1994 in rural Hubei, she belonged to the generation of ‘left-behind children.’ Her parents migrated to the city to work in factories when the Reform and Opening Up economic wave of 1978 enveloped the nation and accelerated the growth of the manufacturing sector. For the past 17 years, Fang Mei and her two younger sisters had been raised by their grandmother. Two months ago, at the age of 19, Fang Mei decided to come work in the city and ended up joining Foxconn. Similar to Xiao Qin, she left her home village with a classmate, who also began working in Foxconn. She explained that her days typically start with a morning meeting at 7:20 AM. She takes a lunch break at 11:00 AM, and dinner at 5:30 PM. Sometimes she skips the evening meal to work overtime until 8:00 PM. She is responsible for tightening screws on iPhones over the course of 12-hour shifts: “It’s tiring because we have to go really fast,” she told me, “and it gets boring.” While her current salary is “barely enough,” she is optimistic that it will increase after her six-month trial period ends.

## ***On the Factory Floor***

*“We wake up before the roosters, go to sleep after the dogs, and eat worse than the pigs” — a Foxconn worker, 2012 (Pun and Chan 2014, 155)*

In line with what Xiao Qin and Fang Mei told me, investigations by journalists, activists, students, and scholars reveal horrendous working conditions inside Foxconn. The hours are infamously long and the wages are low. A typical week consists of 12-hour workdays resulting in an average workweek of 78 hours. Employees get a single day off every other week. The basic income of \$220 (¥900) per month minus some mandatory fees is hardly enough for personal use, let alone for savings or family members. The low pay effectively leads to illegal levels of compulsory overtime work. Moreover, each frontline worker specializes in a specific task and must perform repetitive, machine-like motions at high speed, without any sense of connection or accomplishment toward the final product. Many see themselves as a mere “cog in the machine” (Pun and Chan 2014, 9, 33 and 45).

Workplace setups have proven to be hazardous. When I asked the workers about the availability of protective gear, Fang Mei shrugged: “We have cotton gloves, but I never wear them because they get in the way and slow me down. Most of us wear masks though, because it gets dusty.” Xiao Qin agreed: “It’s too hot to wear gloves in the summer. I’m more clumsy with them on.” Unfortunately, the emphasis on efficiency over safety is not uncommon in Chinese factories. Under pressure from employers to meet relentless demands for speedy production, many workers feel they have no choice but to set aside their protective gear.

For instance, to make shiny, stainless iPhone and iPad casings, raw aluminum is ground through polishing machines. This process produces metallic dust that fill the air, coating workers’ faces, hands, and clothes (see figure 3). When the poisonous particles get in their eyes, the toxin causes tears. While Foxconn provides some protective gear, the gauze

masks lack airtight seals that adequately prevent dust inhalation. Similarly, cotton gloves are easily penetrated by the metallic particles (Pun and Chan 2014, 116).



Figure 3. Foxconn worker covered in aluminum dust after a day of work.  
*Source: Dying for an iPhone (2014), 116.*

In the summer of 2011, an accumulation of aluminum dust in the air duct of a Foxconn Chengdu building led to a deadly explosion that killed four workers and severely injured eighteen others. Later inspections disclosed that Apple and Foxconn had long known about the dangers of excessive amounts of metallic dust that could ignite electric switches. Nevertheless they did not require any preventative measures. Preoccupation with production speed and output at lowest possible cost blinds these giant corporations from caring about their workers' safety. In addition to metallic dust, other workplace hazards are also present. As Lu Jiang, a worker at the Foxconn Zhengzhou plant, reported: "Our milling workshop is really noisy, so noisy that our ears can't take it. Some work positions like laser-soldering have radiation" (Pun and Chan 2014, 114 and 118). However, life beyond the factory floor is not any more endurable.

### ***“Dormitory Labor Regime”***

Dormitory life is structured in ways that promote feelings of alienation. Although Fang Mei came to Foxconn with her fellow classmate, they live and work in different zones and have only seen each other four times in the past two months. “We just keep in touch on QQ,” she said.<sup>6</sup> Dormitory compounds and cafeterias are set up inside manufacturing complexes or next to workplaces, forming all-encompassing industrial towns. Such spatial proximity blurs the line between ‘home’ and ‘work,’ allowing factories to envelope every aspect of their workers’ lives as they toil away like robots. This cost-effective layout also allows maximum control of workers. Eating, sleep, and even showering are all scheduled events like those on production lines; off-hours are solely preparation for another round of production. Scholars refer to this militaristic living arrangement as the “dormitory labor regime” (Pun and Chan 2013, 182).

Activities inside the dormitories are closely monitored and heavily restricted by ‘dorm rules’ that overstep personal freedom. For instance, workers are not allowed to receive family or friends, and workers of opposite genders are forbidden from visiting one other. Security guards stand by the dorm gates around every floor to enforce worker obedience. In this sense, laborers are regulated even during their supposed time off. A standard dorm room contains six to twelve bunk beds, limiting private space to one’s own bed behind a makeshift curtain (see figure 4). Fearing any formation of coalition among workers, management staff purposely places people from different hometowns in the same dorm. Moreover, workers with varying shifts are housed together; as a result, a quiet night of sleep is rare, as roommates come back at different hours throughout the night. On top of that, employees

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<sup>6</sup> QQ is an instant messaging software service that has become one of the dominant tools of communication among people in China since its release in 1999 (Millward 2014).



rarely have any time or energy to interact with one another after coming home from 12-hour shifts. Isolation and loneliness are inevitable (Pun and Chan 2014, 184).



Figure 4. Inside a Foxconn female dorm with eight bunk beds and self-made curtains. Source: "Life Inside Foxconn's Facility in Shenzhen." The Wall Street Journal (2012).

The long hours, repetitive tasks, low wages, crowded dormitories, and lack of human bonds all combine to foster inhumane and alienating workplace conditions that drive workers to end their own lives. For them, suicide is an ultimate release from the profound sense of desperation and frustration that defines their lives.

## II. Role of the State

*"Foxconn is hiring, and the whole city has gone crazy. Local officials grab people and ask if they'd be willing to work at Foxconn. The government has made it an official task. Officials at each level have a recruitment quota. Isn't this recruitment crazy?" — a Foxconn worker in Chengdu, Sichuan. (Pun and Chan 2014, 63)*

The state plays a crucial role in shaping labor relations through intervention or non-intervention. In the business realm, multinational companies and the CCP enjoy a symbiotic relationship: flocks of foreign businesses help absorb the excess Chinese labor caused by market reform, while the government sets up advantageous treatments for investors. By

allowing steep labor discounts and modest wage growths, the state is a key actor in helping foreign companies obtain the ‘China price’ and improve profit margins (Ma and Adams 2013, 78).

The close tie between Chinese authorities and the corporations was all too obvious throughout my fieldwork. A month after visiting the Longhua Foxconn plant, I traveled to the Chengdu Foxconn facility in Pixian County on July 25, 2013 (see figure 5). Located on the northwest corner of Chengdu, Sichuan, this small county seemed empty compared to the ‘Foxconn City’ in Shenzhen. As planned, I signed in at dormitory building A5 to meet with the head dorm manager. “People call me Manager Wu,” he had informed me over the phone a few days prior. He was a short man with a brawny build in his late 20s. Clean-shaven with a buzz cut, he was dressed in a standard white button-down, black business pants, and oxford style black shoes. “Are you the college student?” he shook my hand, “Welcome.”



Figure 5. Foxconn facility in Pixian county, on the outskirts of Chengdu, Sichuan.  
*Source:* photograph taken by author on July 25, 2013.



Figure 6. A Pixian Foxconn dorm building. The red banners read: “Realize the great Chinese Dream. Construct a middle-class society together. Consolidate the Party’s foundation. Build a harmonious society.”

*Source:* photograph taken by author on July 25, 2013.

Manager Wu proceeded to give me a tour of the six-story dorm building, which included two conference rooms on the first floor, a projector room on the second, a smaller conference room on the third, and a library on the fourth. Signs of CCP dominance were ubiquitous. Hanging in the hallways and stairways were paintings of traditional Communist thinkers and leaders, motivational slogans for laborers, and red banners promoting Deng’s economic philosophy<sup>7</sup> and loyalty to the Communist Party (see figure 6, 7, and 8). “You see,” Wu motioned to the decorations, “We are a large, legal company that is loyal to the Party and serves the country.” The irony of seeing Marx’s portrait displayed inside a factory

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<sup>7</sup> The banner promoted *xiaokang* (小康), a term first used by Deng Xiaoping in 1979 as the eventual goal of Chinese modernization. The *xiaokang* society vision is one in which most people are living “a relatively comfortable life,” and economic advancement is no longer the sole focus of society (*China’s Political Economy* 1998, 211.)



complex that mass-produces products largely for export to capitalist countries was overwhelming.



Figure 7. A conference room in a dormitory building in the Pixian Foxconn facility. The portraits from left to right are of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Deng Xiaoping. The middle characters say: “Learn the Party history,” “Understand the Party grace,” “Listen to the Party,” and “Follow the Party’s lead.”

*Source:* photograph taken by author on July 25, 2013.



Figure 8. A dormitory library in the Pixian Foxconn facility. The words on the red banners are praises for the Chinese Communist Party.

*Source:* photograph taken by author on July 25, 2013.

Needless to say, Foxconn’s loyalty to the CCP has its rewards. Over the past few decades, China’s national economy has shifted from focusing on heavy industry – lifetime employment, generous welfare, urban workers – to emphasizing foreign and private

investment – migrant labor, suppressed labor-protection, strict control of workers’ self-organization. This GDP-focused regime led by the CCP has been far more interested in attracting investments than in defending workers’ rights. For instance, in 2010, the Sichuan provincial government rigorously outbid other provinces to secure the building of a gigantic Foxconn production complex by offering favorable tax policies and low-cost land and water. After the contract was signed, aiding this foreign enterprise’s success became a state priority, and its construction was named the “Number One Project.” Officials at the village, township, city, and even provincial level all provided free worker recruitment services to ensure an ample labor force. Government buildings were designated as recruitment centers, with human resources officers hosting interviews for job applicants (see figure 9). Moreover, a significant amount of rent and tax was waived for Foxconn. Such administrative ‘generosity’ subsidized these corporate costs with local taxpayers’ money (Pun and Chan 2014, 63-64).



Figure 9. A government office was transformed into a designated Foxconn recruitment station in Chengdu, Sichuan.  
*Source: Dying for an iPhone (2014), 64.*

With this hand-in-glove relationship between state and corporations, it is clear that worker abuse stems not from a single source, but rather, from a flawed system predicated on

material gain and economic growth. While the CCP boasts about the nation's progress and encourages everyone to look forward to a bright, sustainable future for all, its people cry out in desperation – in cities and the countryside, in factories and throughout construction sites. Despite state proclamations of a 'rising China,' drastic class divisions prevent a significant portion of citizens from enjoying any of the benefits of national development.

### ***China's Labor Laws***

For a country that relies on its workers to keep up its export-driven economy, China provides a shockingly faulty support system for them. In 1994, China passed its first-ever National Labor Law since the establishment of the PRC. The history of this Labor Law is intimately tied with that of worker unrest in the early 1990s, when the national shift toward a market economy caused many to lose their 'iron rice bowls.'

When the promise of lifetime employment was replaced with performance-based labor contracts at state-owned and private enterprises, many took it to the streets. Thus, to attract foreign ventures and reassure them that China was a stable, well-regulated place worthy of investment, the labor legislation even consulted European labor laws (Harney 2009, 43). The law mandates an average workweek of 44 hours and limits overtime to 36 hours per month. Regulations guarantee employees at least one day off a week and four public holidays each year. If a company needs its employees to work longer than the standard workweek, the labor law requires the firm to negotiate with the workers and union first. Overtime pay is one and a half times the regular wage on weekdays, double the regular wage on rest days, and triple the regular wage on Sundays and national holidays. Overtime cannot exceed three hours a day (Harney 2009, 42). The law bans discrimination against

women in recruitment and remuneration, and sets special provisions for pregnant, nursing, or menstruating women (Lee 2005, 9).

Despite these intricate rules in the book, violations of workers' rights are unfortunately common. Rights regularly violated include the right to payment for one's labor, the right to rest days and holidays, the right to a safe workplace environment, and the right to receive social insurance and welfare. For women, gender discrimination in recruitment and remuneration is common (Lee 2005, 9).

Wage and benefit regulations do not exist on a national level, but rather, are a patchwork quilt of regional minimum wages, social welfare provisions, and health and welfare systems set by provincial legislature. For this reason, laborers in the coastal areas earn a higher salary compared to those working in factories in China's West (Pun and Chan 2014, 59-60).

### ***China's Labor Union***

The first national trade union organization in China – the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) – was founded in 1925, during the heyday of Chinese labor activism when workers were organizing their own boycotts and strikes against imperialism. Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Nationalist Party and head of the Chinese state at the time soon felt threatened by the workers' militancy and strength, especially since more than half of the Communist Party's 58,000 members were workers. He attempted to curb the labor movement through the ACFTU by imposing restrictions on workers' self-organization. In 1927, he led a massacre of thousands of workers and trade unionists. After that, workers stopped playing a significant role in the CCP's rise to power (Pai 2013, 210-211).

Nevertheless, the ACFTU continued to be closely aligned with the CCP. Today, the ACFTU remains the only legal union in China, as attempts at forming autonomous unions have been classified by the government as treason or subversion. The national union is open to anyone who wishes to join, so long as they file an application and receive approval from the trade union committee. Any enterprise with over 25 employees is required by the law to establish its own union branch under the ACFTU umbrella. By one count in 2002, there were 165,800 enterprise-level unions (Lee 2005, 18).

In theory, an ACFTU membership guarantees the right to vote, the right to contest elections for union positions, and the right to take part in the running of trade union affairs. However, in practice, ACFTU is largely a ‘straw man’ that is institutionally subordinate to the CCP and financially dependent on the enterprise budget. Union representatives are often appointed by Party leaders. In most cases, the nomination process involves negotiations between the trade union bureaucracy and the employing business. The factory manager often also serves as the union leader, thereby operating under a clear conflict of interest (Harney 2009, 131-132). For instance, when Foxconn finally established a trade union on the last day of 2006, its CEO, Terry Guo, appointed his special assistant, Chen Peng, as the trade union chairwoman. An investigation in 2010 revealed that almost all union representatives were salaried Foxconn officials appointed by upper management. The few exceptions were wage laborers who were also nominated by management to be on the committee (Pun and Chan 2014, 149-150).

Financially, the union depends on the support of enterprises to meet its membership quota. Companies contribute 2% of the total wage bill to their unions, and workers pay 0.5% of their wage as membership fees (Lee 2005, 18). In June 2012, Foxconn announced that



over 90% of its 1.4 million employees had registered as members of the union, making it the largest enterprise-level union in the Chinese manufacturing sector. However, upon closer examination, it appears that Foxconn's high unionization rates are due to the centralized administrative practice of automatically assigning new workers to the workplace union at the time of employment (Pringle 2013, 191-197). Additionally, the Trade Union Law passed in 1992 designates that the enterprises are responsible for paying the salary of union cadres, greatly increasing the companies' power over the unions. In fact, many firm managers see the enterprise unions as an additional instrument to enforce discipline and control over workers (Lee 2005, 18).

"What?" Fang Mei gave a blank look when I asked her about the union. "No, I'm not sure what it does," she let out a nervous giggle. Unsurprisingly, workers have grown cynical toward the official union. "Ah," Xiao Qin sighed, "it's all fake. Useless." Surveys conducted in the 1990s consistently show that workers were unaware of, or disappointed with, the union. Very few people sought help from the union about work-related problems, and even when they did, not many received satisfying results (Lee 2005, 19; Harney 2009, 133). This unfortunate trend continued into the 2000s. Surveys with Foxconn workers in 2010 reveal that 92% of respondents reported that they "do not understand the function of a trade union" and many reported that they thought the human resources department *was* the trade union. Such misunderstandings convey the sad reality on the ground – the union is no more than a political ornament used to legitimize management for corporate customers and the international community (Pun and Chan 2014, 150-151).

The contradiction inherent in the ACFTU's dual role of representing of worker interests and promoting the national interest is sharpened by the union's dependency on

business. In the end, Chinese migrant workers are left with a union that essentially acts as a ‘middle-man’ whose primary focus is to avoid upsetting the nation’s social fabric, even if it means sacrificing workers’ rights.

### ***Labor Disputes***

Another form of employment regulation adopted by the CCP was the labor dispute arbitration system, which existed briefly in the early years of the PRC but was abolished in the late 1950s once private industry was socialized. However, with market reform, the basic structure of settling labor disputes was revived in 1987. The system was initially limited to state-owned enterprises (SOEs) but later expanded to other enterprises. By 1993, the central government promulgated its *Regulations on Handling Labor Disputes in Enterprises*, which expanded the scope of conflict resolution to include disputes other than contract terminations. New laws granted employees the right to file work-related complaints through a four-stage dispute resolution system (Lee 2005, 7-8; Pun and Chan 2014, 137).

Official Labor Dispute Arbitration Committees (LDACs) were established at the municipal and district levels to resolve employment and labor conflicts. Each committee is composed of three government officials, who are paid a fixed salary regardless of the number of cases processed. As expected, most arbitrators prefer to work on as few cases as possible. They also have a personal stake in dissuading any worker who comes into the office from filing a complaint. Some arbitrators even provide inaccurate information to urge workers to drop disputes (Pun and Chan 2014, 138). As a result, the committees’ main objective skews toward preserving the appearance of social and economic stability, rather than truly fighting for workers’ rights.

Nevertheless, the recently developed labor dispute provisions outlined in the 2008 *Labor Contract Law* and the *Labor Dispute Mediation and Arbitration Law* opened up new avenues and resources for workers to challenge not only their employers, but also local state officials. The number of cases heard at LDACs has almost doubled from 47,951 in 1996 to 693,000 in 2008 (see figure 10). Typically, labor disputes have involved back wages, nonpayment of overtime, work-related illness or injury, and lack of insurance contributions (“China’s labor dispute resolution” 2010).

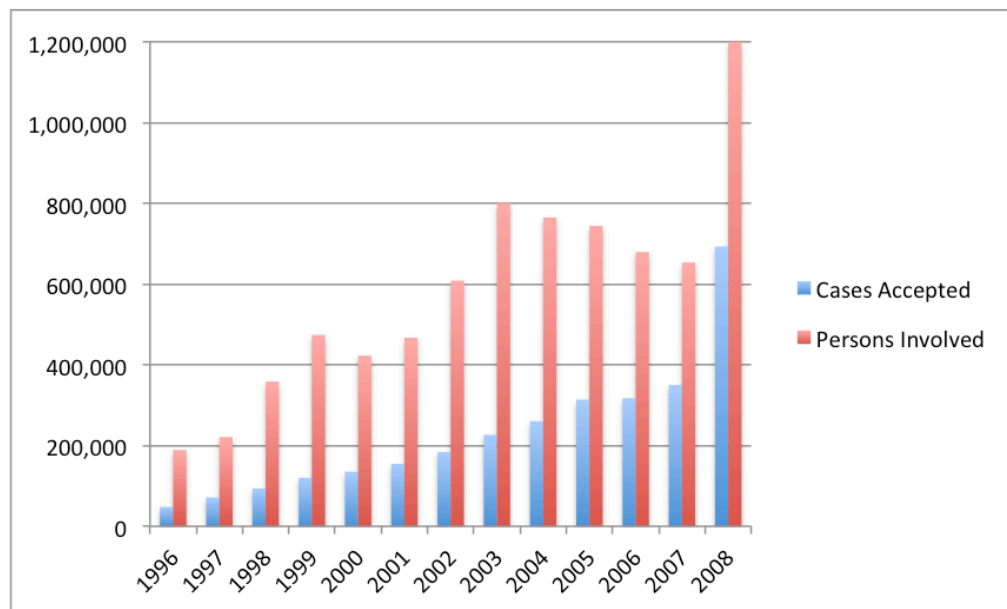


Figure 10. Cases accepted by labor dispute arbitration committees 1996-2008.  
Source: 1996-2007 figures obtained from the China Statistical Yearbook (various years);  
2008 figures from the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security.

With China’s economic liberalization has come an equally rapid rise in the number of disputes between employers and employees. The 2008 recession brought about numerous job losses and wage suspensions, driving many workers to the streets. The peaceful resolution of labor disputes is now among the country’s top priorities. However, LDACs are typically

understaffed and deal with a backlog of cases. Each case takes around 10 months to resolve, often in favor of the employers (Pai 2013, 39-40).

Unfortunately, although workers are increasingly willing and determined to stand up for their legal rights and sue their employer, the process is rarely straightforward. The law itself can seem convoluted and insurmountable to many migrant workers. Lawsuits are costly and do not always end justly. Thus along with the increase in labor dispute arbitration cases, the number of mass incidents<sup>8</sup> has also been rising rapidly in recently years (Pai 2013, 10). In fact, the decade of 2000 to 2010 witnessed a rising against corruption and abuse of power by local authorities expressed through mass strikes and protests (see figure 11).

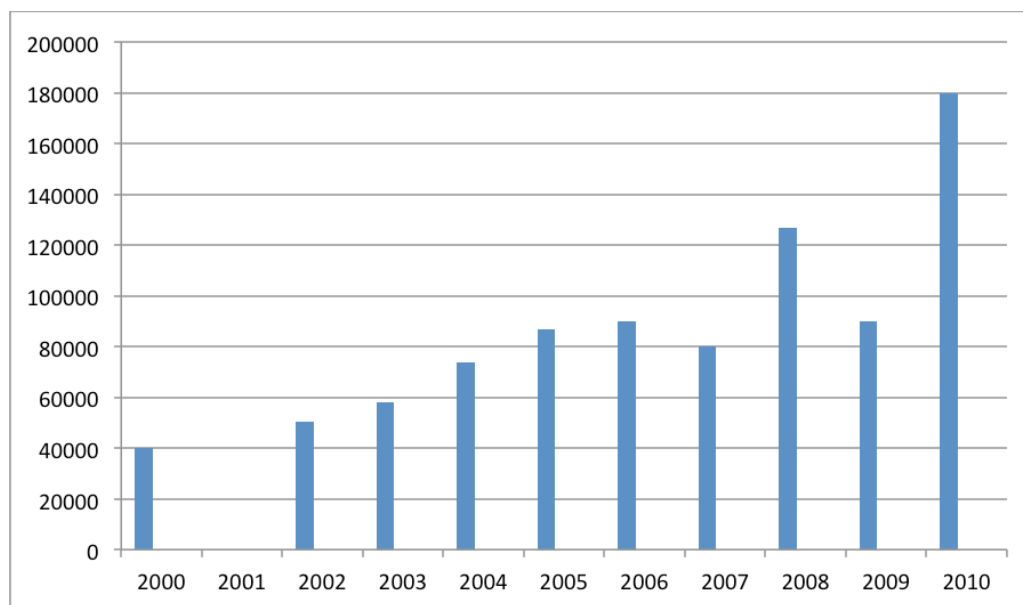


Figure 11. Mass incidents in China 2000-2010.

*Note:* No reliable data available for 2001.

*Source:* "Interpreting 'Mass Incidents' in China." *Strategy Boffins* (2013).

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<sup>8</sup> In China, a “mass incident” (群体事件) is the officially accepted name for “any kind of planned or impromptu gathering that forms because of internal contradictions,” including physical conflicts, protests, riots, and other forms of group behavior that may disrupt social stability (Ran 2011). These incidents include demonstrations, riots, protests and petitions involving 15 people or more (Pai 2013, 10).

The emergent workers' movement in China is complex and multi-faceted, but it is clear that the Chinese workers are becoming increasingly frustrated by the contradictions present in the labor laws and the national trade union. With workers more determined than before to stand up for their rights, what is going to happen once the bubbling anger erupts?

### **III. New Generation of Migrants and Their Collective Actions**

Academic interest in internal migration in China is nothing new. For decades, this itinerant demographic has been the subject of dozens of books and hundreds of articles. Recently, scholars have turned their attention to the 'new generation' or 'second generation' of Chinese migrant workers, born in the reform era. Known as the 'post-1980s cohort,' this population currently makes up two-thirds of the migrant labor force. Like Fang Mei, most of them were part of the 'left-behind children,' who stayed in the countryside with their grandparents while their parents took up jobs far away. Most had followed their parents to the city once they were old enough to attend primary school. They grew up living a savvy urban life and have little expertise in farming (Chan 2013).

These young migrants tend to approach the workforce with different expectations and attitudes than previous generations. This generation of rural migrant workers is more concerned about acquiring new skills and professional knowledge than with making money (Pun and Chan 2014, 35 and 151). As Fang Mei explained her reason for leaving Hubei: "Because Shenzhen is where things happen!" she told me excitedly, "I wanted to come see the world and learn new things. My parents were against it. They wanted me to stay home and continue school, but I'm bad at studying." When I asked how she felt about her decision now, her response was: "I feel like I'm growing up. Being in the city means that I have to be

more responsible, but I also have more freedom.” The migration of young people such as Fang Mei must be viewed as a multifaceted phenomenon in which gender, class, age and location all play a role in influencing the decision to leave the countryside.

Compared to their parents, the post-1980s cohort is better educated, more aware of their rights, and more vocal about their demands. While the Chinese worker has often been imagined as “diabolically exploited, haplessly diligent, mindlessly docile, nondescript, and disposable” (Lee 2007, ix), such stereotypes (if they ever were accurate) are not applicable to the new generation. Over the recent decades, workers are finding unique ways to pressure employers to increase wages despite the government’s severe restriction on freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike. They do so through “strikes, slowdown, industrial sabotage, group fighting, mass suicide threats, road blockades, and riots.” Some of these organizing skills are inspired by histories of collective activity from the socialist period, and others are acquired through social networking platforms that connect transnational regions (Pun and Chan 2014, 156).

### ***Honda strike of 2010***

Many workers have taken to the streets in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis that dealt a blow to China’s export industry and led to millions of job losses and wage suspensions. During this time, migrant workers have become more ambitious and militant in making demands. Industrial conflict between employees and employers over matters related to the working conditions has grown fiercer, and migrant workers’ collective actions have begun to gain wider public attention. Authorities regularly bring in the riot police to control

mass incidents and restore public order. The instigators of these incidents are usually convicted on criminal charges and sentenced to prison (Pai 2013, 183-185).

A landmark protests took place on May 17, 2010. Honda's Nanhai plant in Guangdong, China was forced to suspend its production of car parts, as 170 assembly line workers walked off the job to push for higher wages. Having trouble supporting themselves on the company's basic pay, migrant workers demanded a raise of ¥800 (to ¥2,500 per month), better working conditions, and democratic elections for union representatives (Gough 2010). This strike ignited worker actions in other factories, and eventually all four Honda plants in China ground to a halt. In June 2010, 1,700 migrant workers – mostly young women who graduated from vocational school – went on strike at Honda's Zhongshan factory in Guangdong. They demanded a doubling of their wages and the right to form an independent union. They complained that the employers and the government had complete control over the enterprise union, which failed to represent their interests. Rejecting the companies' offers of compromise, workers insisted on creating their own union (Pai 2013, 186). On May 27, 2010, around 2000 workers marched down the streets and chanted various slogans: "strike until success," "re-construct trade union," and "fight until demands are met." In the end, workers received a monthly raise of ¥1,000-1,200 (Pandey 2010, 3)

The wave of strikes suddenly and unexpectedly spiraled into a landmark event in China's recent labor history. In addition to threatening China's already tenuous social stability, this form of worker activism demonstrates the bargaining power of those who work for today's just-in-time manufacturing companies, whose operations allow little margin for error when supply chains get disrupted. *China Labour Bulletin* communications director

Geoffrey Crothall commented: “What we are seeing increasingly is grass-roots action where workers strike and force management to negotiate directly with them” (Gough 2010).

### ***Labor Unrest at Foxconn Facilities***

In October of 2011, Foxconn workers in Shenzhen staged a slowdown precisely at a time when a new model of an e-book reader was about to be unveiled. As the contract company pressured for increased productivity, Foxconn raised the output quota multiple times. Workers complained: “We’ve been pushed like mad dogs to meet unattainable production targets. Our hands and our minds never rest.” Finally they had had enough, and the assembly workers of a particular line collectively began to perform their tasks slowly. The next day, they decided to escalate their action and began making defective products. Some intentionally left out screws, while others affixed the bar code in the wrong places. Workers spread the word about this protest to involve as many people as possible so that no one individual could be identified or singled out for punishment. This slowdown not only forced the employer to take workers more seriously, but also crystalized the bargaining power in the hands of the new generation of migrants (Pun and Chan 2014, 156-158).

On January 2, 2012, Foxconn’s managers in Wuhan decided to forcibly move 600 workers to a new production line that made computer cases for Acer, another Taiwanese company. The workers were provided no training for their new jobs in the new facility. Their salary, which is proportional to their productivity, decreased sharply. These events led to 150 workers threatening to commit mass suicide by jumping off their factory roof if the company failed to meet their compensation demands (see figure 12). The collective threat quickly drew government and media attention, as workers posted up-to-date messages on various forms of



social media via their cell phones. That night, Wuhan's mayor finally intervened and talked the group off the building by ordering management to compensate the affected workers in accordance with the law (Pun and Chan 2014, 166).



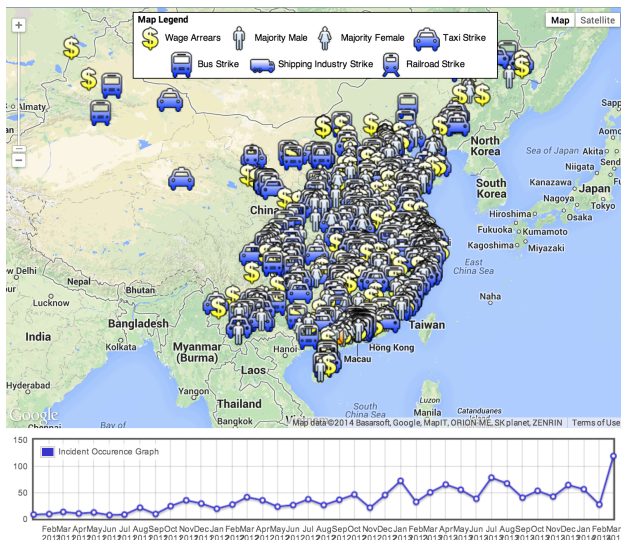
Figure 12. Foxconn workers threatening to commit mass suicide.  
*Source: Dying for an iPhone* (2014), 166.

In September 2012, a riot broke out at the Foxconn plant in Taiyuan, Shanxi. A few security guards sparked this incident when they beat two assembly workers for failing to show their staff IDs. Riot police officers and special security forces showed up to crack down on the chaos and ended up detaining most workers who resisted (see figure 13). This unrest resulted in the shutdown of production lines for three days during a time when the new iPhone 5 was setting record sales and on-time product delivery was Apple's top priority. Since demand for the new phone far exceeded the initial supply, workers were provided with sufficient leverage to bargain for higher wages, better benefits, and more humane working conditions (Litzinger 2013, 177; Pun and Chan 2014, 147-148).



Figure 13. Armed police officers dispatched to tame the unrest at the Foxconn Taiyuan plant.  
*Source: Dying for an iPhone (2014), 163.*

More recently, China Labour Bulletin estimates that in 2013 China experienced about 656 strikes in the year, up 255% from 185 strikes in 2011 (see figure 14). Workers in all sectors (e.g. transport, manufacturing, construction, etc.) gathered for numerous strikes and protests in order to further their demands ("China's workers turn up the heat in summer of protest" 2013).



Time Period	Number of strikes
2011 Jan - Jun	59
2011 Jul – Dec.	126
2012 Jan - Jun	171
2012 Jul – Dec.	211
2013 Jan - Jun	312
2013 Jul – Dec.	344

Figure 14. Strikes from 2011 to 2013.

*Note:* The year-on-year increase in the number of strikes recorded may have been influenced by an increase in the amount of information available about these protests on social media as well as more open reporting the traditional media in China.

*Source:* “Strike Map.” *China Labour Bulletin* (2014).

Through these protests, workers have learned how to negotiate with senior executives using impromptu and innovative actions. Actions taken in one region of China are often copied in other places soon after (Pun and Chan 2014, 169). While China serves the world as its factory, it has also turned into a battleground for workers fighting for basic rights. The new generation of workers has brought global attention to their struggles, and their actions will no doubt play a vital role in shaping the future of labor movements not only in China, but also throughout the world. In the next chapter, I will discuss digital developments in China, and how technology can be used to support social activism.

## Chapter Two: Technology, the Double-Edged Sword

As he concluded his eight-year correspondence for *The New Yorker* in Beijing, Evan Osnos chose to write his final blog post on the story of Qi Xiangfu. Qi was a migrant worker from Jiangsu Province who had moved to Beijing three months prior. During the day, he worked for the sanitation department as a street sweeper, but outside of his work he would compete in poetry tournaments. Eventually, he won the title of “Super King of Chinese Couplets.” After meeting, Qi encouraged the American reporter to go online and read about him.

With a quick search on the web, Osnos soon found Qi’s profile on Baidu Tieba.<sup>9</sup> The profile indicated that Qi was the host of a modern Chinese poetry online forum. In fact, the more Osnos searched, the more he “found a life lived partly online.” Qi’s profile picture showed him handsomely dressed in a bow tie and a blazer. Underneath the picture was a short autobiography that Qi had penned in third person and with the formality usually reserved for China’s most famous writers. The most startling aspect of this story concerns China’s technological development in the past twenty years. Osnos notes:

*So much of it was impossible just a few years ago: the journey to the city, the online identity, the interior life so at odds with the image he projected to the world. When I first studied in China, seventeen years ago, the Internet was only a distant rumor. It had reached China two years earlier, but hardly anyone had access. When I brought a modem from the U.S., and tried to plug it into my dorm-room wall in Beijing, the machine emitted a sickly popping sound and never stirred again. (Osnos 2013)*

While Osnos tells an aspirational story, I am going to approach the topic of technology usage from a different, sometimes less glamorous, angle. The following chapter covers the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and how

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<sup>9</sup> Baidu Tieba is a communication platform provided by Baidu, the largest search engine in China. Baidu Tieba contains a massive collection of mini-forums dedicated to every subject from niche TV shows to entire cities and provinces. With 200 million users, it is one of the largest Chinese online forum communities (Custer 2012).

ICTs act as a double-edged sword, both liberating and constraining migrants. Specifically, I explore the growth of Internet and mobile phone services from mid-1990s to the 2000s. Combining existing literature and my own fieldwork, I highlight how young migrant workers utilize technology to empower themselves through maintaining social relations and exchanging information. I also observe how the Chinese government has responded with a number of proactive measures to subdue technology's threat to its authoritarian regime. Additionally, I dissect the ways in which technology and the consumption of technology disempower migrants by constraining them to be 'submissive citizens.' Finally, this chapter ends with two examples of how ICT access gave rise to new ways of challenging the established social order from a grassroots level.

## **I. Modes of Access**

### ***Internet Cafés***

Commercial Internet first entered Mainland China in 1995 through cybercafés located in the IT hub of northern Beijing. Not only were the cybercafé machines confusing to operate, the hourly rate of ¥20 (\$2.40) practically made the service exclusive to the rich elite. The most frequent customers were foreign exchange students, Chinese students applying to schools overseas, or students from university computer science departments. Since then, Internet usage in China has gone through a remarkable transformation, along with the public perception of cybercafés and their customers (Qiu 2009, 21).

Public Internet spaces were popping up across the nation during the 1990s. As the World Wide Web became popular in Mainland China web developers carved out a space on the Internet for their comrade users. As these websites were created, Chinese language on the

Internet became more widespread. Additionally, the client base for cybercafés began to slowly evolve. Users no longer were there to retrieve foreign-language contents or to check emails. Instead, they relied on Net bars mostly for recreational purposes. The bars' main function changed from fostering a two-way communication flow of information to delivering one-way entertainment (Qiu 2009, 22).

Over the next decade, the public image of Net bars deteriorated. In the mid to late 1990s, commercial mass media started to stigmatize the Net bar industry. News stories on Internet cafés almost always associated them with crackdowns, accidents, or moral degradation. The cafés soon acquired the reputation of being the hangout spot for thugs and criminals, places where black market exchanges and other illegal activities took place (Qiu 2009, 23). Such stigmatization spread throughout society. Growing up in the 90s in southwestern China, my cousins and I were often warned about the dangers of Internet cafés. Our worrying grandmother almost always updated us on the latest horrific tale she overheard in the neighborhood about how a coworker's teenage son went into a cybercafé, met some gangster friends, and was now addicted to drugs and in debt. These events were often publicized and dramatized by the mass media, prompting nationwide call for stricter state regulations. However, even then, the Internet was not prevalent and was essentially a nonfactor for the majority of the Chinese.

The years 1999 and 2000 saw the fastest growth of Internet café users in China (see figure 15). Access to the web became available to a much wider population, as Net bar fees steadily decreased. A report in *China News* indicated that China's cybercafés charged an average hourly rate of merely ¥2 (\$0.25) ("After Experiencing 10 Years of Rise and Fall, China's Cybercafés Have Become the 'Sunset' Industry" [author's translation] 2014). In the

countryside, the rate was as little as ¥1 (\$0.12) (Qiu 2009, 41). Thus, cybercafés serve as a collective mode of access to information for those in the working class. They provide an inexpensive networking platform through which the lower class can connect and share information. In this way, the Internet can be said to be more democratic and egalitarian than the real world in China. This is why migrant workers like Qi are able to have an entire interior life that simply was not available to them ten years ago.

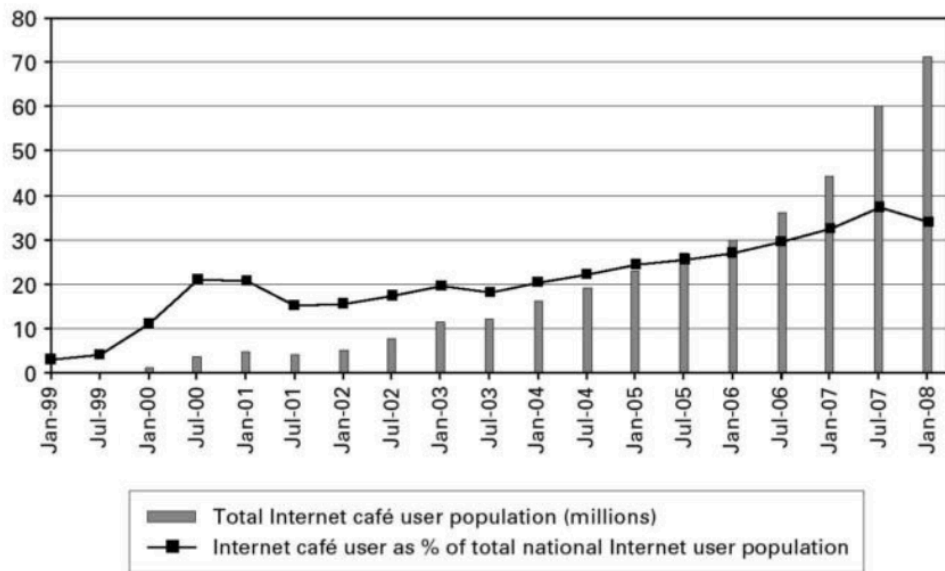


Figure 15. Growth of Internet café user population in China, 1999-2008.  
*Source: Working-Class Network Society (2009), 25.*

The growing impact of the Internet prompted state regulation of web contents. A number of government agencies (e.g. the Ministry of Information Industry, the police, and the Ministry of Culture) joined forces to eventually create the Great Firewall of China, the infamous Internet filtering and censorship system used by the CCP. New state regulations were promulgated to tighten measures regarding websites, chat rooms, and online forums (Qiu 2009, 24-25 and 32-33). Later in this section, I will further illustrate the authorities' role in Internet management.

### *Mobile Phone Usage*

In recent years, most of Net cafés' original target customers (i.e. the elite or upper-class professionals) now have their own web access at home or at work. The proportion of cybercafé users declined 9%, or 33.76 million people, between 2010 and 2011 ("Statistical Report on Internet Development in China" 2011, 6). Thus, the contemporary cybercafé population is primarily made up of the "information have-less."<sup>10</sup> Additionally, excessive crackdowns have led to a decrease in the cybercafé user population nationwide. As a result of these two factors, most Net bars now exist only in back alleys, at city peripheries, in small towns, and in the countryside (Qiu 2009, 41).

Despite the downturn of cybercafés, the number of Internet users in China continues to rise. According to the 32<sup>nd</sup> Statistical Report on Internet Development in China released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), the Internet penetration rate at the end of June 2013 was 44.1% (see figure 16).<sup>11</sup> In other words, the number of web users in China had reached 591 million, up by 26.56 million compared to the number of users in 2012 (CNNIC report 2013, 9).

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<sup>10</sup> Throughout my thesis, I adopt Jack Qiu's definition of the information have-less: "a broad category of low-income consumers and providers such as rural-to-urban migrants, laid-off workers, retirees, and youth who have gained access to ICTs since the turn of the century (9).

<sup>11</sup> The China Network Information Center (CNNIC) is the official monitor of the country's Internet industry.



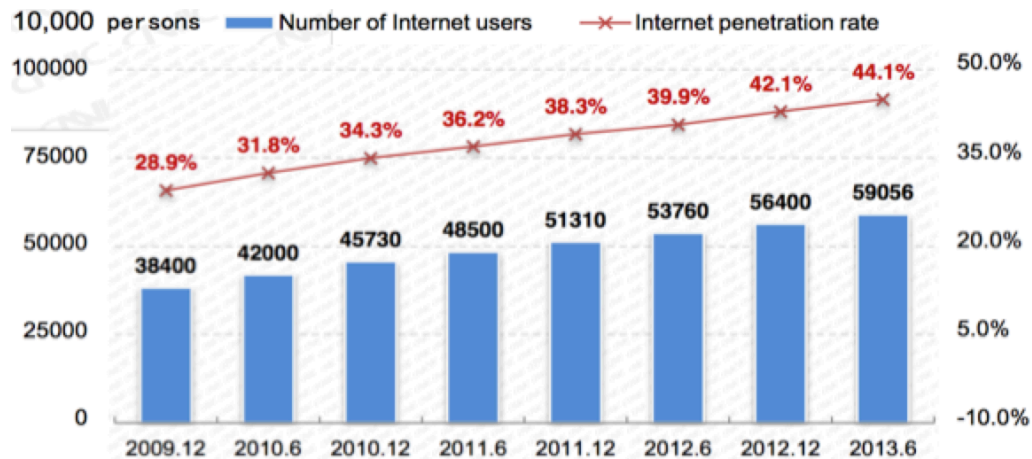


Figure 16. Size of Chinese Internet users and Internet penetration rate.  
*Source:* "Statistical Report on Internet Development in China" (2013), 9.

Perhaps more intriguing is that of the 591 million Internet users, 70% are mobile Internet users. In fact, the proportion of users who rely on mobile phones as their main device for web access far outnumbers that of any other device. The mobile-to-others ratio continues to grow at a rate of 19.1% (see figure 17), indicating that the mobile phone is the major driving force for the growth of Chinese Internet users. China had 464 million mobile Internet users by the end of June 2013, demonstrating an increase of 43.79 million people in just one year ("Statistical Report on Internet Development in China" 2013, 10).

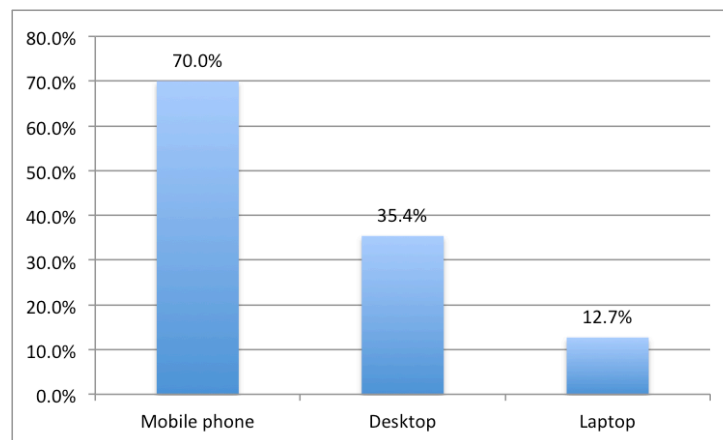


Figure 17. Usage of Internet-based Devices of New Internet Users in 2013.  
*Source:* "Statistical Report on Internet Development in China" (2014), 10.

The present day popularity of mobile phone usage is quite astonishing, reflecting the speed in which China's telecommunications sector has developed in the past two decades (see figure 18). The telephone first entered China in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through European settlements along the coast (i.e. in Shanghai and Hong Kong). However, telephone service remained exclusive to the nation's top leaders for almost a century. The penetration at the time of the 1949 Communist takeover was one phone per 2,000 people. With Deng's Reform and Opening Up economic policies, the first analog mobile phone service appeared in China in 1987. At that time, the national "teledensity" was one phone per 133 people by 1987. There was a huge untapped market, and mobile communications finally took off in the mid-1990s. Since then, access to mobile services has grown exponentially, spreading to the lower social strata beginning in 2000. By 2003, the number of mobile subscribers surpassed that of landline, and by the end of 2007, China hosted the world's largest national mobile subscriber population (Qiu 2009, 52-53).

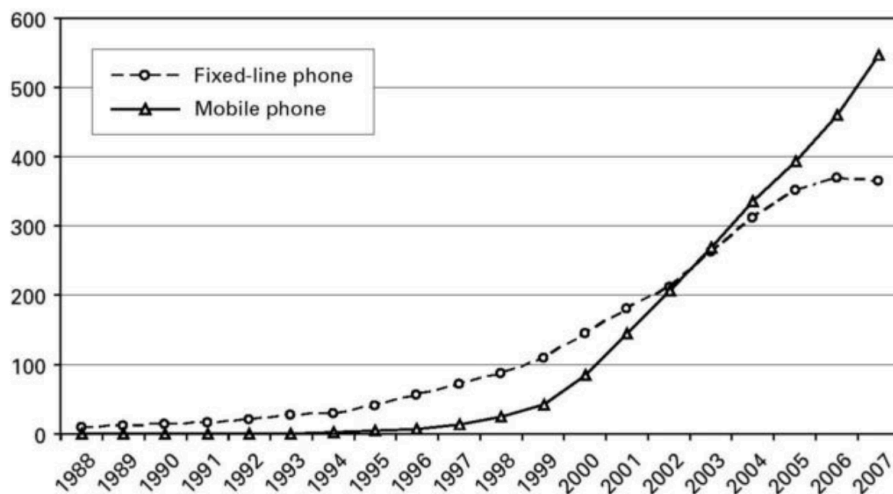


Figure 18 Year-end total subscriber population of fixed-line and mobile phones from 1988 to 2007 in millions.

*Source: Working-Class Network Society (2009), 53.*

### *Navigating Networks*

As information and communication technologies (ICTs) popularize in China, they have also become integral to the way migrants navigate their social relationships.<sup>12</sup> On the most basic level, a mobile phone is used to keep in touch with friends and family members who are far away or too busy to meet up in person (Wallis 2013, 93-98). Moreover, the mobile phone has become a transmission device used to expand networks. For migrants in China, keeping up with friends or find a new job in the city is virtually impossible without a cellphone. Letters between factories often get lost, and calling up a worker's dorm phone is extremely inconvenient. Not only is a single dorm phone often shared among dozens of people on the same hallway, but it is also typically programmed to block outside calls. Some phones are even set to cut off automatically after several minutes. In any case, people change jobs so often that dorm and office numbers regularly go out of date (Chang 2008, 95).

When I talked to Fang Mei, one of the Foxconn worker in Shenzhen, she also discussed her dependence on the mobile phone in helping her overcome the isolating "dormitory labor regime."<sup>13</sup> Even though her hometown classmate is a fellow Foxconn employee, they are assigned different living and working zones and rarely see each other. Moreover, she typically works extremely long hours – sometimes up to 14 hours a day – with only one or two days off per month. So when she finally does get a break, she needs to spend that time sleeping or taking care of errands, such as doing laundry or shopping for groceries.

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<sup>12</sup> ICTs refer to any communication device or application – including radio, television, cellular phones, computer and network hardware and software, and satellite systems – as well as the various services and applications associated with them (Murray 2011).

<sup>13</sup> As explained in Chapter One of this thesis, scholars have adopted the term "dormitory labor regime" to refer to the militaristic living arrangement inside factory dorms.

Thus, Fang Mei only really stays in touch with her friends via phone calls, text messages, and the Internet messaging application, QQ.

Another migrant worker I talked to revealed similar sentiments. Zhang Huijie, a woman in her early thirties, works in the Chengdu Foxconn plant.<sup>14</sup> She comes from a small village in Sichuan, not far from the Foxconn facilities, but going home still takes four to five hours by bus. Constrained by few breaks and expensive bus tickets, she can only take two to three trips home every year. Thus she relies on her phone to call and send pictures to her two children, husband, and mother.

Beyond being useful for staying connected with friends and family, ICTs also allow people to expand beyond traditional forms of social interactions. An important trend in recent years has been the growing popularity of “net friends” that people have only met online, but often have not met face-to-face (Wallis 2013, 102). One of the main features of QQ is its vast amount of “groups,” which are chat rooms that can host up to 1,000 people. Groups can be public or private, and most of the public groups have specific themes, such as hometowns or fandoms. These QQ groups, particularly the public ones, bring new opportunities for expanding relationships. Also, they also provide a space for which information can be quickly exchanged and spread among users. In fact, many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that focus on worker rights and labor issues also utilize QQ groups as a platform to reach out to migrants who are unfamiliar with their organization. In the next chapter, I will delve more into how these operations are carried out.

Finally, ICTs help migrant workers gain network capital, which can then be translated into real-life benefits. In most cities, finding a job required not only a college diploma and

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<sup>14</sup> The Chengdu Foxconn plant is located in Chengdu, Sichuan, which is in the southwest region of China.

money, but also connections. Knowing the right people is the road to success (Chang 2008, 92; Pei 2013, 39). This is especially true for migrants, who need help with employment, housing, and bureaucratic requirements, such as temporary work permits and urban ID cards. Something as simple as securing a train ticket home at a reasonable price during the holiday seasons requires connections (Chang 2008, 273). Thus, the act of keeping in touch with people not only helps workers overcome loneliness, but it also serves the purpose of building a connection base (Wallis 2013, 101). Considering migrants' economic and social circumstances, mobile phones and the Internet are best (and possibly the only) ways for them to maintain communication within established relationships. These ICTs thus provide a means for migrant workers to surpass spatial-temporal constraints.

## **II. Big Brother and ICTs Control**

Uneven development of ICTs inevitably leads to digital divides and information inequalities. Much of the research on this subject mostly emphasizes the schism between the wealthy (information haves) and the poor (information have-nots). However, this simplistic binary is inadequate in reflecting the complex techno-socio interplay present in contemporary China. These dynamics are informed not just by a problem of access, but also of “class formation, collective identity, and political power” under the structural parameters of a rapidly industrializing country (Qiu 2009, 7). Instead of seeing the situation as a single divide, it is important to recognize the vast middle ground within informational stratification. Even with the emergence of new modes of access (i.e. Internet cafés and mobile phones), numerous barriers still exist between information haves and information have-nots.

## *Internet Surveillance*

One form of force creating and reinforcing information stratification is the state's determination to police the Internet. As mentioned, the Great Firewall keeps out "undesirable" foreign websites. Facebook and Twitter were first blocked in mid-2009, after authorities blamed the social networking sites for the deadly riots that happened in Xinjiang province earlier that year. Other blocked websites include Google, YouTube, Blogspot, Dropbox, Soundcloud, etc. In 2012, Chinese authorities decided to start banning access to Bloomberg websites after it reported the multi-million dollar fortune amassed by ex-politician Bo Xilai's family (Hirschberg 2012) and current President Xi Jinping's relatives (Bennett 2012). *The New York Times (NYT)* suffered a similar fate after its correspondent, David Barboza, exposed corruption involving the then-premier, Wen Jiabao's secret wealth, acquired through corrupt means.<sup>15</sup> While many elites had been aware of these rumors concerning high-level officials, the blocking of the websites and censorship on micro-blogs (the Chinese version of Twitter) meant that many non-elites remained unaware of such accounts.

When I was studying abroad in China, the Internet would have been excruciatingly slow and faulty if not for the virtual private network (VPN) service my university provided.<sup>16</sup> My attempts at accessing a blocked site or typing censored words in a search engine without turning on the VPN would lead to slowing down of the page load, followed by a message announcing "This webpage is not available." Given these restrictions, the majority of the

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<sup>15</sup> David Barboza published "Billions in Hidden Riches for Family of Chinese Leader" on October of 2012. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting in 2013 for exposing corruption at high levels of the Chinese government.

<sup>16</sup> Virtual private network is a method of employing encryption to provide secure access to a remote computer (of specific applications or data overseas) over the Internet.

expats and elites I know in China sought access to some form of VPN. Some paid for their own services (with prices ranging from \$6 to \$11 per month), while others acquired them through their schools or employers. Needless to say, these methods of circumventing China's Internet filters are not available to working class ICTs. Consequently, their access to information and people outside of China is limited. In 2013, the CCP lifted its ban on Facebook, Twitter, and the *New York Times* for the elites who live in the free trade zone in Shanghai, an area that is approximately 17-square miles (Woollaston 2013).

### ***Telecommunication Surveillance***

State surveillance is also prevalent in China's telecommunication industry. As cellphones grew in popularity, the authorities began to monitor short messaging services (SMS). Government supervision was catalyzed by the 2003 SARS epidemic, during which SMS first demonstrated its ability for alternative information exchange beyond official control.<sup>17</sup> As more people heard about the onset of SARS, the CCP started to worry about the effects of such information on social stability. The speed and breadth of text messages induced panic within the Party, which called for the arrest of about a dozen people under the accusation that they "spread rumors." Since then, the state has not loosened its grip on SMS surveillance ("Information Control and Self-Censorship in the PRC and the Spread of SARS" May 7, 2003).

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<sup>17</sup> In 2003, an outbreak of SARS (or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in southern China led to an eventual 8,273 cases and 775 deaths reported in multiple countries ("Summary of probable SARS cases with onset of illness from 1 November 2002 to 31 July 2003" December 31, 2003). Chinese government officials refused to acknowledge the outbreak at first. However, their attempts at covering up the spread not only drew international criticism, but also led to hundreds of deaths ("SARS epidemic: China wakes up" 2003).

In fact, many technology companies have turned state surveillance into a business opportunity and have supplied sufficient surveillance systems for various state departments. One example is the Cybervision SMS filtering system developed by Venus Info Tech Inc. This company was founded by former overseas Chinese students and is headquartered in Beijing. The filtering system monitors information content using specific algorithms based on keywords or combinations of keywords (Qiu 2009, 71-72). With these tools, the government is able to closely watch its people. It is not uncommon for people to be arrested on the basis of spreading “rumors” or “indecent content” for their texting content.

### ***Real Name Registration***

Unlike Internet café owners, mobile subscribers are not required to register with their real names. This crucial difference is due to the structural positioning of the stakeholders. While Internet cafés are mostly small, private businesses, SMS service providers are much more established. Three main companies – China Mobile, China Unicom, and China Telecom – dominate the market share for mobile services, where a big chunk of their profit go to state-owned corporations (Qiu 2009, 73).

However, the relatively lax mobile user regulation was tightened in 2012, when a flood of online criticism against the CCP rattled China’s officials. In line with the increased bans on foreign news websites mentioned previously, authorities passed a law that required users to register with their real names and other identifying information on mobile-accessible social media sites, such as Weibo.<sup>18</sup> While the measure was supposedly implemented to

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<sup>18</sup> Weibo, the Chinese word for “microblog,” is often referred to as the “Chinese Twitter.” Weibo replicates many characteristics of its Western counterpart, including the 140-character limit and the re-tweet function (Wines et al. 2011).



“strengthen protections for personal information,” its intention to silence was obvious (McDonald 2012). Yet, this attempt to control text contents has proven difficult to execute and easy to avoid for China’s tech-savvy users (Perry et al. 2014).

In 2014, the state implemented similar real-name registration rule for individual Internet users in order to suppress anti-government sentiments. Under the new regulations, web users were required to register their real names to upload videos to websites. Officials claimed that the new rule has been implemented to “prevent vulgar content, base art forms, exaggerated violence and sexual content in Internet video having a negative effect on society.” However, their actual reasons for specifically targeting video sites was because those sites are hubs for social critiques, with netizens often uploading footage that show political corruption, injustice, and abuse (Perry et al. 2014).<sup>19</sup>

In short, the rise of Internet and SMS usage provides inexpensive communication services to many in the working class. Since the Internet allows access to multiple sources of images, news, and ideas, the state is threatened by the distribution of information that would disrupt its ideologies. However, even with the state’s pervasive censorship of the Internet, some netizens still manage to stay ahead of the censor programs and bypass state control. Due to the nature of the mobile registration process, Chinese authorities have even less control over mobile subscribers than over Internet users. As a result, the anonymity that comes with mobile services leads to potential for digital activism.

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<sup>19</sup> A netizen is a citizen who uses the Internet as a way of participating in political society (e.g. exchanging views, providing information, and voting).

### III. The Pursuit of Modernity

Beyond evaluating China's technological progress through instances of empowerment, as I have done thus far, it is equally critical to examine how the Internet and mobile phones disempower migrants. For years, the state has favored the city as the pivot that represents the quintessence of Chinese modernity, particularly its national economic growth and technological development. By contrast, the countryside has been labeled as the backward wasteland hampered by feudal traditions and conservative customs. Thus, many post-80s and post-90s cohorts are lured into leaving their small home villages to explore an urban, globalized, and glamorized environment. As numerous scholars have noted, the majority of the rural youth are migrating to cities to seek their own growth and fulfillment, of which "cosmopolitanism and modernity" are significant emphases. This new generation of migrants are embracing the city life and improving their social status; seeking economic rewards is not their primary goal (Wallis 2013; Pun and Chan 2014; Chang 2008; Pringles 2013; Litzinger 2013).

#### ***Suzhi and the Reconstruction of the Self***

Central to the official discourse of modernity in the past couple of decades is the notion of *suzhi* (素质), which translates to human "value" or "quality." However, the direct translation fails to capture the entirety of the term. *Suzhi* encompasses the evaluation of an individual both as a whole and as a collection of specific aspects, including physical, moral, and psychological qualities. One's *suzhi* is reflected through one's education level, fashion choices, and even one's accent (Yan 2008, 75). Gradually, Chinese popular culture has also picked up on the state's language of modernity, reproducing and disseminating the concept of

*suzhi* through a range of social actors. It has become a social keyword widely used to evaluate human value and differentiate people into different social and economic strata. To have low *suzhi* is to be backwards: to think and behave like a peasant. Having high *suzhi* is regarded as “being a good person” (Jacka 2005, 41). The development of *suzhi* is by no means a particular task for the rural population; it is a general project undertaken by all citizens to raise the quality of the population as a whole. However, the understanding of *suzhi* inevitably produce distinct rankings of groups of people, of which migrants from the countryside are at the bottom. Individuals from villages are frequently subject to open critiques for their lack of *suzhi* (Wallis 2013, 46). As a result, labor migration is often seen as a pathway for peasants to transform from “country bumpkins” to “productive citizens” who have truly realized their full value as human beings (Yan 2008, 124).

The main way to refine one’s *suzhi* is through education, which develops skills, manners, and discipline. In *Factory Girls*, author Leslie Chang described her experience of sitting through a semester of white-collar classes in community centers intended to teach students social etiquette, such as “how to make hand gestures and how to stand, sit, cross their legs, walk, carry documents, and squat to pick something off the office floor” (183). The class curriculum also incorporated makeup application, eating and drinking manners, and speech techniques. Other courses taught secretarial skills (202), English (251), and other practical skills. Citing a survey of 4,000 workers in nearby Shenzhen, Chang tells us that one-third of the respondents had enrolled in these types of classes (184). She interpreted the workers’ aim to improve their *suzhi* as a form of self-empowerment through education: “I realized I was witnessing a secret revolution in Chinese education. The rejects of the traditional school system were given a second chance” (184).

Meanwhile, other scholars see the business of self-molding as an ideological state apparatus for exercising authoritarian control. In *Technomobility in China*, Cara Wallis interprets the concept of *suzhi* through Foucault's theory of governmentality, which can be broadly defined as the "underlying rationalities, tactics, and actions of various actors and institutions" aiming to improve prosperity, security, and the overall well being of both the state and the individual. People comply with the state-guided rationalities, and over time, they begin to internalize these regulations and self-govern in order to achieve better social integration. A key aspect of governmentality involves Foucault's theory of "technologies of the self," which permit individuals to transform themselves through "a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being" in order to attain a certain internal state, whether it be "happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Wallis 2013, 9-10). This governmentality manifests in the official discourse of *suzhi*, where self-development and self-management are key qualities of any "good" Chinese citizen, and is in line with Chang's description of the white-collar classes offered in community centers. Thus Wallis concludes that *suzhi* can thus be understood as "a form of neoliberal governmentality, where self-development and self-management are key qualities of... the enterprising self" (Wallis 2013, 45).

The paradox in the discourse on *suzhi* is that it implies innate qualities deep within people (often based on upbringing), but at the same time entails possibilities of improvement. Precisely because the definition of *suzhi* is ever changing, and thus impossible to pin down, its meaning is often manipulated by those in power (Wallis 2013, 45). While migrants strive to attain higher *suzhi*, the standard for what is "good *suzhi*" varies enormously from one context to another. The bar can always be raised higher; people can always improve even

more. Therefore the concept of *suzhi* has the potential to develop indefinitely, and it effectively functions as an “intangible operator” in the labor contract (Yan 2008, 124).

### ***Becoming Modern Through Consumption***

In addition to attending education and training courses, Chinese citizens are also encouraged to become modern consumers. In fact, the state discourse has created a strong link between modernity and conspicuous consumption, fashion, and lifestyle. For instance, shopping malls are known in Chinese as “mo” and are often associated with the word *modeng* (摩登) which translates into “modern” (Chang 2008, 335). Leslie Chang describes newly migrated peasants as “solitary and lost.” After some time in the city, they soon become city-savvy: “They walked with purpose, in groups; they looked happy, and they knew the way. They carried cash in their pockets and shopping bags of gifts for their families” (Chang 2008, 119).

Although Chang portrays this transition as one of empowerment, other scholars understand it as a sign that material comforts have replaced political rights in state policy. In *New Masters, New Servants* (2008), author Hairong Yan argues against the claim that consumption is a liberating force that will lead to democratization. In studying rural women who migrate to become domestic workers in the city, Yan noticed that their consumption is often constrained by their association with labor. Many migrants can wear only a certain type of clothes, often plain and utilitarian, in order to be deemed hireable as domestic workers. Employers have an impression of how migrant laborers should look, so those who step out of those bounds are subject to scrutiny. Additionally, migrant consumers are constrained by

their meager wages, which do not allow for the level of consumption that could elevate them to the celebrated ideal of the modern consumer (Yan 2008, 158 and 177-178).

Similar to Chang's description, Wallis notes that the migrant women in Beijing feel a sense of empowerment and affirmation through the consumption of technology. A cellphone is usually a young migrant's "first big urban purchase" upon moving to the city, because it signifies the beginning of a transformation to a modernized subject. In contrast to Chang's analysis, Wallis' research connects practices of consumption to the everyday formation of subjectivity, social relations, and modes of governmentality. The state, by linking technology with development, civilization, and modernity, has cultivated migrants as consumer subjects. Most migrant women spend an inordinate amount of money on their first mobile device, up to a month-and-a-half's salary and sometimes even sacrifice train tickets home after months of being away (Wallis 2003, 62). This purchase is clearly a very important event that entails serious choices and sacrifices, because a mobile phone is much more than just a material gadget for migrant women in Beijing. Possession of a cellphone has come to symbolize modernity and empowerment (Wallis 2003, 102). The irony stands that the Chinese mobile phone industry would not be here without the information have-less, who provided both a substantial consumer basis as well as essential manufacturing labor.

In terms of user behavior, migrants are also constrained by their financial situations to truly attain the ideal level of consumption. For example, most young migrant workers tend to buy relatively expensive mobile phones as status symbols. However they then prefer to interact via SMS instead of voice calls, because voice calls on a mobile phone (usually costing ¥ 0.50 to ¥0.70 per minute for both parties) are often perceived as too expensive, especially for the information have-less. A text message, on the other hand, only costs ¥ 0.10

for the sender and is free for the receiver. They opt to spend their savings on purchasing a trendy mobile phone, but cannot afford voice calls (Qiu 68-69). This type of conspicuous consumption is particularly telling of migrants' attempt to "modernize" despite their economic constraints.

While on the surface level, these migrants may appear to be making purchases in an act of agency and freewill, Wallis argues that they are also serving as "ethical subjects" in Foucault's sense of the phrase (78). This "choice" is based on fantasies and aspirations fostered through the official state narrative. For many, "consumer citizenship" – the expression of agency and identity through consumption practices – has become the primary means of affirming their status and worth in the society. Nevertheless, as migrants they are still denied full legal and social citizenship in urban settings (48). It may appear that these women are making their own choices, and as long as they are making their own choices, they are free. However, what are the driving forces behind each decision? In reality, the choices they make concerning migration, work, and consumerism do not happen in a vacuum. Their choices are shaped by their upbringings, surroundings, and life philosophies. They are subject to state propaganda and are socialized as migrant women to feel insecure about countryside "backwardness." As a result, they suffer from internalized discrimination against the rural population, a group to which they themselves belonged not so long ago. In this sense, the purchase of a phone embodies the migrants' deep longing for modernity and sense of belonging in the city.

#### **IV. Grassroots Networking and Mobile Resistance**

In light of technology's dual function in empowering and disempowering migrants, how effective is it in bringing about social change? Despite the state's continued determination to regulate the Internet, China's top social media platforms – QQ, Weibo, and Weixin – continue to successfully expand their user base. An average day sees 150 million new comments posted on Weibo (Wines 2012). In recent years, social media are forcing a new level of transparency in how the government handles incidents. Chinese netizens have played an increasingly major role in covering and circulating breaking news, setting in motion what some call the “microblogging revolution” (Wines et al. 2011). The ICTs thus provide a means for grassroots networking and bottom-up activism. Two examples of fatal cases involving migrant workers will show the effects of public uproar demonstrated through and kindled by social media. In these examples, we see the power netizens hold in China's contemporary milieu.

##### ***Case One: Sun Zhigang***

Sun Zhigang's story is one of many migrant tragedies rooted in social discrimination and faulty state infrastructures. Originally from a rural village in Hubei Province, Sun migrated to work as a graphic designer in Shenzhen, Guangzhou in 2003. On his way to a cybercafé one day, the police detained him for not having proper temporary residence documentations. They sent him to a psychiatric hospital, and beat him to death 60 hours later. Illegal detainment and physical abuse of migrants are not uncommon. However, what distinguishes his case from others is the unprecedented public uproar spread through social media and online forums that eventually pressured the Guangzhou police department into



apologizing for mishandling the incident. For Chinese authority figures to publically admit wrongdoing was a significant victory in earning justice for Sun, especially since the practice contradicts China's longstanding tradition of "saving face." More importantly, Sun's death caught the attention of the Beijing Central Government officials, who decided to replace the "Regulation for Detention and Deportation of Urban Vagrants and Beggars" with a more lenient and productive system in an attempt to prevent similar tragedies in the future (Qiu 2009, 211; Crothall 2013).

The Sun Zhigang incident was arguably one of the most important events of 2003 in terms of legal reform to protect the rights of migrant workers. The impact of this case could be due to several main factors. First, Sun's college graduate status helped win enormous amounts of sympathy in mainstream society. Second, the timing of the incident coincided with the SARS epidemic, during which people spent more time on the Internet in order to stay up-to-date on the latest information about disease control. They also had more free time to go online, since most people were staying home to avoid catching the illness in public places. Third, as mentioned in Chapter One, Guangzhou is a hub for migrants in southern China. Thus Sun's case was more than a personal tragedy; it reflected the collective suffering of all internal migrants (Qiu 2009, 211).

### ***Case Two: Yuan Liya***

In May of 2013, Yuan Liya, a 22-year-old clothing store worker from Anhui province, fell from the fifth floor of the shopping center in Beijing where her shop was located.<sup>20</sup> Her death was quickly ruled as a suicide by the authorities, but the mass public was

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<sup>20</sup> Anhui province is located in the eastern region of China.

convinced that she was gang-raped by six or seven security guards in the mall, before being thrown off the balcony. An “anti-suicide pledge” started circulating on the web as a reaction to the suspicious ruling of Yuan’s death. The pledge, which reads, “I will never commit suicide. If I die unexpectedly, I was killed by others and the police should investigate the crime,” made its way throughout Weibo more than 20 million times. People posted the pledge as a way to prevent a similar fate, as well as to protest the injustice of Yuan’s death. With the circulation of angry social media posts that expressed suspicions of foul play, thousands of people, many of whom were also migrants from Anhui, rallied to protest Yuan’s death near the mall where she fell (see figure 19) (Song 2013; Hatton 2013).



Figure 19. Crowd protesting Yuan Liya’s death.  
*Source: "Chinese Woman Yuan Liya's Death Brings Chinese To Beijing Streets In Protest." International Business Times (2013).*

The incidents around Sun Zhigang and the Yuan Liya are powerful examples that reflect how grassroots social media activism can bring about legal changes. With the advent of ICTs and the remarkable spread of Chinese social media, the potential for bottom-up

activism has increased substantially. The emergence of a new international visibility and rage are propelled by social networking and instant sharing of information. Technology's function in allowing users to cross spatial-temporal boundaries is especially useful in sharing information among migrant workers and labor NGOs. In the next chapter, I will specifically apply ICT capabilities to labor activism, and discuss how activism experiences are shared trans-regionally via ICTs.

### Chapter Three: Weaving the Activism Web

*“China's workers have already begun the march towards workplace democracy... Compared to 35 years ago, China's workers are willing and increasingly determined to take their future into their own hands.” – Han Dongfang, Director of China Labour Bulletin (Han 2014).*

In contrast to the spontaneous strikes and social media rallies discussed in Chapters One and Two respectively, labor-focused nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) present a more organized and arguably more sustainable method of resistance. The distinctive political and economic atmosphere in China has shaped the rise of a unique kind of labor NGO.<sup>21</sup> As noted by labor scholars C.K. Lee and Shen Yuan, the founders of these organizations often fall into two major categories: former workers and concerned professionals. Former workers were often victims of occupational injuries or illnesses and were involved in some form of labor disputes (e.g. wage or compensation). The process of pursuing redress empowered and inspired them to devote their careers to advocating for workers' rights. On the other hand, concerned professionals stem from a variety of fields, including journalism, academia, and law (175).

In addition to the two groups outlined by Lee and Shen, I came across yet another type of activist. They are college or graduate-school-educated, peasants in the legal sense (based on their *hukou*), and their parents are migrants who work in mines, construction sites, or factories. The following chapter delves into the various types of activists, including migrant workers, NGO workers, scholars, and students. Using my field notes from interviews and participant observations, I look at the activists' backgrounds, goals, and organizing strategies. Besides discussing their individual roles in advocating for workers' rights, I specifically explore how social media helps establish networks and share activist experiences.

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<sup>21</sup> I use the term “labor NGO” in a broad sense to refer to the nonprofit organizations whose primary objective relates to workers and labor issues, such as occupational health, on-time payment, or litigation.

## I. From Worker to Activist

### *Southern Sparrow*

“In today’s session, we are going to discuss the parameters of occupational injuries and deaths,” He Xiaobo announced in front of a roomful of workers, “and the process of obtaining adequate compensation in those instances.” He scribbled *gong shang*, the Chinese characters for “occupational injuries” on a mobile whiteboard. A few members of the audience shuffled in their seats: “Yeah!” shouted a deep voice, “Make them pay!” A few chimed in, “*Dui, dui!* [Yes, yes!]” I was sitting among a group of 50 migrants, a couple lawyers, and a law from the nearby Sun Yat-Sen University (SYSU) at a legal consultation session held by Southern Sparrow Social Work Service Center (see figure 20). Southern Sparrow is a labor NGO based in Foshan, a small town on the outskirts of Guangzhou, Guangdong, and He Xiaobo is its founder and director.<sup>22</sup> He had left his hometown in Henan Province, located in central China, to work in a factory almost 20 years ago. When I met him in the summer of 2013, Xiaobo was at the forefront of advocating for workers’ rights and interests.

In 1998, Xiaobo worked in a state-run electronics factory in Henan before following a friend to Guangdong in March of 2006. There, he made capacitors at an electronics factory, earning around ¥3,500 (\$563) a month. While his parents wished for him to stay in their home province, the high salary drew Xiaobo to the city: “I wanted to work for three months, and return once I’ve earned over ¥10,000.” However, an accident occurred within the first two months of his employment, costing Xiaobo not only his job, but also three fingers on his left hand. “I was working 36-hour shifts at the time. Plus no one really taught me how to use

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<sup>22</sup> 南飞雁社会工作服务部 (*Nan Fei Yan She Hui Gong Zuo Fu Wu Bu*)

the machines so I had to teach myself.” Fatigue combined with gaps in knowledge regarding the correct method of using factory equipment ultimately resulted in his injury. Based on his actual salary of ¥3,500 per month, he should have received ¥12,000 in compensation. However, his boss insisted on using his “official salary” of ¥800 per month to calculate his compensation. After seven months of legal disputes, Xiaobo was only able to get ¥6,000 in compensation. “I was devastated,” Xiaobo recalled, “now that I could no longer work with my hands, what was I left to do? What were my options as a disabled person in Guangzhou?” Unfortunately, his case is not uncommon.



Figure 20. He Xiaobo hosting a legal consultation session in the Southern Sparrow conference room in Foshan, Guangzhou.  
*Source:* photograph taken by author on July 6, 2013.

While visiting a wounded coworker in 2006, Xiaobo came across the Panyu Service Department for Peasant Workers,<sup>23</sup> a migrant NGO located in Panyu, Guangdong. Founded in 1998 by Zeng Feiyang, the Service Department is the first NGO in China devoted to serving internal migrants. Aside from providing legal consultation and aiding workers in getting fair compensation for work-related injuries, Zeng’s NGO also helps integrate

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<sup>23</sup> 番禺打工族 (Panyu Da Gong Zu)

migrants into the city by providing “*suzhi* improvement” courses. Through computer, English, and dance lessons, Zeng hopes to enrich migrants’ lives and raise their confidence. Xiaobo was instantly drawn to the NGO and signed up as a full-time volunteer.

A year later, Xiaobo decided to extend Zeng’s work and opened up his own labor NGO in Foshan. “Things were very difficult in the beginning,” he explained, “We lacked funding, and I had a hard time managing everything all on my own.” He turned a rented apartment into an informal office, where he regularly held legal consulting sessions for local workers. Economic constraints aside, legal matters also limited Xiaobo’s work. Due to the notoriously difficult NGO registration process in Mainland China, he had to operate as a branch underneath the Panyu Service Department for the first four years.

The 2008 global financial crisis prompted a ¥4 trillion stimulus aimed at infrastructure investment. The increase in need for more workers subsequently led to a rise in demand for labor NGOs. Yet, Xiaobo notes that while charity-related or community-building NGOs are becoming more common, registration for rights-advocacy NGOs remains difficult. The state continues to feel threatened by the possibility of NGO activities turning into mass incidents of social unrest (from petition campaigns to riots) that could undermine CCP’s legitimacy. Xiaobo speculates that changes in NGO regulation can only be improved gradually through continuous communication and collaboration.

Lee and Shen’s report reflects a similar sentiment. Through a survey of mission statements, the two scholars found that Chinese NGOs share a similar set of self-professed aims, namely the creation of “solidarity” and “cooperation”; the protection of “rights”; and the “integration of migrant workers.” Often times, collaboration with local authorities not only provides a shield from potential crackdowns, but also grant a sense of legitimacy that

can win over the public's trust (Lee et al. 2011, 177). The state's structural power is a daily reality many activists and workers have to live with, and many even learn to use the structure to their advantage. Thus, having political connections and semi-official identity cards is essential to increasing influence and efficiency. For instance, the founder of Little Flowers<sup>24</sup> believes that "it is very unwise for Chinese NGOs to stay away from the government. If you cannot function effectively, you cannot survive... we can only try to find the best position to realize our goals" (179).

Xiaobo formally registered Southern Sparrow Social Work Service Center in December of 2009, with the ultimate goal of safeguarding the rights and interests of migrant laborers through two main methods: 1) by providing legal advice and litigation courses for workers and their families (see figure 21) and 2) by fostering a support network among workers and NGOs. Currently, there are five full-time staff members and more than 100 volunteers. Local lawyers, university professors, and other agencies often collaborate with Southern Sparrow in providing recreational activities (i.e. art, drama, and sports), psychological counseling (via group sessions, hotlines, or chat rooms), and legal consulting services (through similar venues). They also host visits to injured workers in hospitals and at home.

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<sup>24</sup> Little Flowers is an NGO formed in Beijing in 1999. Its mission is to provide specialized care to abandoned infants and nurture the growth and education of older disabled orphans.





Figure 21. An information board in the Southern Sparrow conference room that provides a simple introduction to the labor dispute process.  
*Source:* photograph taken by author on July 6, 2013.

Lee and Shen describe the NGOs as “bargain hunters” whose goals involve obtaining the best deals for workers, sometimes by negotiations with employer and other times by appealing to their compassion (Lee et al. 2011, 181). In the Southern Sparrow group session, the workers learned how to use the law as a framework for communicating with their employers. Xiaobo stated, “It doesn’t matter whose fault it is, as long as you get hurt at work, it counts as an occupational injury, and your employer is legally obliged to take responsibility.” The SYSU law professor verified that this is indeed true, adding that the only two exceptions to this rule are: 1) if the workers were under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time of the incident and 2) if they were performing an act against safety advice (e.g. taking apart a machine illegally).

Operating under a state that strictly monitors NGO operations, activists often have to prioritize practicality. The staff members at Southern Sparrow’s consulting session seemed to

have accepted that receiving full compensation was impossible, and thus were urging workers to settle for obtaining the highest possible payment. Lee and Shen's article from 2008 details their observation that NGOs only focused on practical outcomes, such as wages, working conditions, and compensations. They believe that this strategy of obtaining wages is inadequate in instilling rights consciousness on either side. In fact, they argue that the lack of development in worker solidarity and collective action perpetuates their "powerlessness and indignation." For instance, most NGO members focus on the literal contents of the Labor Law, without reflecting on its contexts. Lee and Shen expressed frustration over the absence of rights-related discussions during legal education sessions. They want NGO leaders to talk about the underlying power structure that shapes the nature and working of the legal system. Questions that they addressed include: who made the law; who is perpetuating the legal system; and are the provisions efficient in protecting workers' rights? In the absence of rights recognition by workers themselves, they do not have enough power to fully realize the provisions of the Labor Law (182).

In the legal consultation session I attended at Southern Sparrow, the idea of "rights" was never discussed from a fundamental or natural perspective. Similar to what Lee and Shen saw, talk about "rights" was only in terms of what the law outlines. However, as unnerving as it seems, practicality is also a crucial element. The workers in the Southern Sparrow conference room that morning were spending half of their biweekly weekends just to attend the consultation session. How useful or realistic would a grandiose discussion on ideology be? Workers get almost no time off, and they came to the session not to learn about fundamental rights nor to plan a corporate coup. Instead, they attended with the pragmatic goal of learning how to obtain their salaries and survive.

## **II. From Scholar to Activist**

However, rights-recognition was not completely absent in the activist work I observed in the summer of 2013. The majority of the activists who emphasized rights ideology tended to be more on the scholarly side; this demographic included college students, graduates, professors, or researchers who are either migrants themselves or have been engaged in the issue of migration throughout their career. The two labor NGOs I examine in this section (SACOM and CLB) are both based in Hong Kong. Their location thus allows leeway not available to Mainland organizations. They stage protests, publish research reports, and act as a window through which the international community can understand what is happening on the ground in Mainland.

### ***Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior (SACOM)***

One example of scholar-led NGOs is Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior (SACOM), a Hong Kong-based nonprofit organization that aims to bring concerned students, scholars, labor activists, and consumers together to monitor corporate behavior and to advocate for workers' rights. Over Starbucks coffee and chocolate muffins, SACOM member Pui Kwan Liang gave me an account of her organization. Founded in June 2005, SACOM originated from a students' movement to improve the labor conditions of cleaning workers and security guards. Over the years, the organization has been involved in advocating for the rights of factory workers at Disney, HP, and Foxconn. They collaborate closely with other labor NGOs to provide in-factory training to workers in the Pearl Delta region of China.

Pui explained that SACOM has three main foci: 1) to research and reveal corporate corruption (e.g. working conditions, worker treatments, salary payment, punctuality, etc.); 2) to promote others' labor-related reports (e.g. investigation of Foxconn trade union by a coalition of universities' centers); and 3) to act as a "press release" agent for labor-related events. SACOM has a close relationship with media and NGOs all around the world, from Hong Kong, Europe, and America. They keep in touch through email and share research findings and activist strategies on a regular basis. One of these organizations is United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), the largest youth-led, student labor campaign organization, with affiliated locals on college campus throughout the United States and Canada. USAS, originated at Duke University, is based on the idea that students and community members can act in solidarity with workers' struggles locally and around the world. Using their school's business relations with garment companies like Nike and Adidas as leverage, students can push for anti-sweatshop campaigns. Following the USAS model, SACOM also hopes to unite students to fight for the labor rights cause.

Due to the nature of their focus, members of SACOM do not engage in personal interactions with workers themselves. Instead, they tend to get a "lead" for certain incidents via Weibo, before hiring on-the-ground investigators to find out more details. These investigators are usually from Mainland China-based independent organizations and are paid to look into incidents from both inside and outside the factory.

Operating in Hong Kong means that SACOM holds numerous advantages over the NGOs in Mainland in that it operates under a less restrictive set of laws. It is in less danger of getting shut down. More importantly, it is more connected with foreign organizations, which provides the NGO with more avenues to obtain funding as well as to exchange information.

In this way, it is able to act as an intermediary that connects Mainland activists with scholars and media around the world.

### ***China Labour Bulletin (CLB)***

In a morning in mid-June 2013, I paid a visit to the Hong Kong office of China Labour Bulletin (CLB), a labor NGO founded in 1994 by activist Han Dongfang. One of his colleagues, Geoff Crothall, told me that their NGO works to develop democratic trade unions through a bottom-up approach. They push for grassroots changes within the existing system, not against it. Since China has an established body of labor law, a comprehensive court system, and a growing number of private lawyers, CLB believes in working for activism openly and within the legal system. Their approach includes urging workers to assert their right to collectively bargain. Despite being located in Hong Kong, CLB also acts as a liaison office that connects different segments of the activism network in Mainland China. For instance, CLB connects workers with lawyers who can provide legal aid to help them navigate the complex legal landscape. Over the past six years, CLB has developed one of the largest labor rights litigation programs in China. The organization sees corruption in China as one of its most pervasive problems. Thus by strengthening the rule of law one case at a time, the organization hopes to assist in the formation of a strong and dynamic Chinese labor movement.

While Geoff and I talked, Han was interviewing migrant workers by phone in his studio next door. The interviews were for a thrice-weekly radio program entitled “Radio Free Asia.” In some cases, he looks through workers’ Weibo or blog posts to find candidates to interview, and other times workers themselves call in or e-mail to explain their legal troubles.

Han responds on the air by explaining the cases and discussing possible legal strategies. Sometimes he actively intervenes by drafting up legal memos on behalf of the workers. Beyond obtaining compensation for workers, CLB also openly encourages workers to engage in labor activism. Geoff explained that younger migrants are beginning to recognize that their local labor offices are failing in their duties to protect workers. Thus they now see that they have rights and are pushing to procure their legal entitlement. This is a crucial step forward.

Additionally, CLB produces extensive research reports and timely blog posts about China's labor issues in both English and Chinese. These posts provide in-depth analyses of work conditions, work-related illnesses, formal employment contracts, worker rights, etc., and can be found on the CLB website.<sup>25</sup> Some executive summaries are also available in French, German, and Italian. In this way, CLB shares their findings and experiences with the international community.

### **III. The Future of Labor Activism**

#### ***A Migrant Community Class***

Born with a rural *hukou*, Xu Hui always struggled against a system that stacked everything against him. After graduating from college, he worked closely with scholars like Ellen David Freedman and Pun Ngai on labor issues. His work ranged from conducting fieldwork for professors to working at the Foxconn factory in Chongqing for three months to collect data. "Pun Ngai is on the state's watch list and has restricted mobility in Mainland," he told me, "so it's easier for me to check things out for her beforehand." At the time I talked to him, he was the full-time coordinator of a student-led labor program at SYSU in

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.clb.org.hk/>

Guangzhou, Guangdong. He was young, hot-blooded, idealistic, and determined. He had a vision for how the world should be and was not going to let obstacles stand in his path. He regularly held lectures for factory workers in Shenzhen. He mostly focused on contemporary issues, as a way of helping the workers stay informed. “Life inside the factory is extremely dull,” Xu commented, “I just hope to broaden their connection to the world outside of those machines.”

On a hot, summer afternoon in July 2013, I followed Xu to a local library for his weekly lecture.<sup>26</sup> The topic for that week was environmental activism. Sitting in a corner of the very last row, I watched as Xu stood before two bright red flags – one for the PRC and one for the Communist party. He wore a crooked grin beneath his thick-rimmed glasses. Facing him were rows of around 50 factory workers, some of whom had arrived straight from their morning shifts and were still in their uniforms. They seemed to be in their 20s or early 30s. They listened intently as an environmentalist from a local NGO spoke about the health hazards of certain factory chemicals. The environmentalist detailed the types of protective gear necessary for each chemical, and lots of workers began scribbling down notes, and many waved their hands in the air with questions about other types of factories. “My father works for a laptop-making factory,” said one young man, “and he’s responsible for wiping clean display screens during production with this chemical called n-hexane. What does that do and does he need gloves?” The environmentalist explained that many factories were beginning to replace alcohol-based cleaner with n-hexane, because it evaporated much more quickly, thereby increasing their efficiency. However, the chemical was poisonous and many

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<sup>26</sup> The library we went to was officially named 劳工图书馆, or “Service Workers Library.”

had fallen ill because of it. The speaker told the young man to encourage his father to demand gloves from the factory owners.



Figure 22. Xu Hui delivering a lecture on environmental activism for migrant workers in Shenzhen, Guangzhou.

*Source:* photograph taken by author on July 7, 2013.

Later, Xu went through a wide variety of Chinese environmental news in the past year. He talked about the new dam-building plans designed during the annual Communist Conference held earlier that year in February,<sup>27</sup> the existence of “pneumonia villages” and “cancer villages,”<sup>28</sup> the water shortage crisis in northwestern parts of China,<sup>29</sup> and the report of 2,800 dead pigs that flowed down the Yangtze river to Shanghai in March of 2013,<sup>30</sup> Not

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<sup>27</sup> In the past, China’s project on the Three Gorges Dam involved displacing 1.4 millions villagers who lived on the banks of the Yangtze River (Clark 2012). Recently, after decades of controversy over resettlement, the PRC decided to double its hydropower capacity by 2030, mainly by building dams on the Mekong and other rivers in southwest China (Meng 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Some villages in China contain an abnormally high percentage of people with respiratory diseases or cancer, mostly due to pollution from nearby factories.

<sup>29</sup> Namely, Lanzhou province and Qinghai province.

<sup>30</sup> Dead pigs were fished up in spring of 2013 from a river that runs through Shanghai. While the officials insist that tap water in the city is still safe to drink, local residents have



only were these issues critical current events, but they also reflected the tensions pervasive throughout China. In the presentation, Xu shared insightful and provocative views that strayed from mainstream reports.

The workers turned out to be incredibly active learners in the lecture. They raised questions often and were not afraid to challenge Xu on some of the facts he presented. “But I read somewhere that dams help prevent floods,” one female worker contested, “They are good for our environment!” Nodding, Xu agreed that he had heard of similar arguments in the past, but suggested that the film we were about to watch next may change her mind. He proceeded to play a documentary on the projector that captured how the local minorities were affected by the dams built in their homeland. I was shocked to find that this documentary contained footage similar to that shown in *Waking the Green Tiger* a 2011 documentary that is banned in China.<sup>31</sup> We watched interviews of many locals who were forced off their land with little compensation, and we watched older villagers who had resorted to picking up trash along the riverbanks to make a living. The youth have left their homes to work as migrant laborers in the city. However, beyond the victimization of the villagers, the documentary featured archival of footage of environmental activists taking advantage of their democratic right to speak out and take part in government decisions.

When the film ended, the room was silent, and I could see silhouettes of people shuffling in their seats. Showing several websites, including Greenpeace, on the Power Point, Xu encouraged the workers to do their own research: “You guys can go online and search

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expressed concern through Weibo and other social media that the dead pigs would contaminate the city’s tap water and make it unsafe to drink (Hunt et al. 2013).

<sup>31</sup> A 2011 documentary directed by Gary Marcuse, *Waking the Green Tiger* captures a grassroots environmental movement to stop a dam project on the Upper Yangtze river in southwestern China (Marcuse 2011).

about this later if you're interested in learning more." The shocking implication of this film screening extends beyond the possibility of it being banned. Here was a roomful of migrant workers, most of who came from rural villages, not only learning about others' struggles, but also being exposed to collective campaigning. Touching on the resettlement rights of displaced villagers and human rights to clean water, Xu offered a nonconformist voice that is too rare in China's public spaces.

Following the movie, the topic turned to the recent PX<sup>32</sup> campaigns, which are a series of grassroots, public protests against plans to build chemical plants near urban neighborhoods. According to Xu, rallies started in 2012 in Xiamen, where mass texts about the cancer-inducing effects of PX were being passed around. Soon, the demonstrations spread across the country to Dalian, Ningbo, Kunming, Chengdu, etc. Public opposition successfully halted multiple PX projects. The local governments have had to change the location twice due to unrests. In May 2013, almost 3,000 locals in Kunming took part in a protest that eventually drove the mayor into starting up a Weibo to communicate with his citizens. "This is an example of people fighting for their rights, and they saw results," Xu announced, "This is democracy." Here, Xu provided a solid example of ordinary citizens using their democratic rights to influence state policies. Again, activism from another part of China was being shared with workers here in Guangzhou.

More importantly, technology was an integral part of Xu's activist work. From showing the documentary through his computer to encouraging workers to do their own research on the Internet, technology is playing a crucial role in enabling a form of activism that simply was not possible a couple decades ago. The usage of Weibo and SMS in

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<sup>32</sup> PX stands for paraxylene, a carcinogenic chemical used in manufacturing fabrics and plastic bottles (Peng et al. 2013).

communicating information shows a form of mobile phone revolution. Technology was used not only to organize collective action in an area, but more importantly, what we see here is technology being used to pass on activism experience from one region of China to another. These migrant workers are using the very technology they are making for their own community-building and networking.

### ***Labor Convention***

Through Xu Hui and Pun Ngai, I learned about an opportunity to attend the third annual Labor Convention that was taking place in Ningbo, Zhejiang in mid-July 2013.<sup>33</sup> It was mainly sponsored by Hong Kong Polytechnic University and Sun Yat-Sen University (located in Guangzhou, Guangdong). The convention leaders included prominent China labor scholars from top-tier universities, including Pun Ngai from Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Shen Yuan from Tsinghua University in Beijing, Xia Zhujiu from National Taiwan University, Lu Huilin from Peking University, Wu Chongqing from Sun Yat-Sen University, and Jack Qiu from Chinese University of Hong Kong. Moreover, there were almost 100 attendees made up of undergraduate students, graduate students, university professors, and NGO workers. The convention covered all the housing, meals, and transportation. Several people told me that they had learned about this opportunity through a circulating Weibo post and had applied despite skepticism about whether or not they would actually get in.

The weeklong convention was split up between lectures and group discussions. Nightly readings were assigned to complement the lectures for the following day. During the

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<sup>33</sup> Ningbo, a city in Zhejiang, is located near Shanghai. It is in eastern China.

first half of the week, the majority of the talks focused on the work of Western political philosophers (e.g. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels). The professors and leaders of the convention strongly believed in adhering to Marxism-Leninism-Maoism ideas on “true” socialism, which have long gone bankrupt in the contemporary Chinese Communist Party. We watched Michael Moore’s 2009 documentary *Capitalism: A Love Story*, which put forward an indictment of the United States economic order and capitalism in general.

The small group discussions were not only meant to facilitate the understanding of lecture materials, but also designed as an opportunity for attendees to get to know each other on a more personal level. I learned that most of the student attendees held a rural *hukou*, and many of their parents belonged to the older generation of migrant workers who had moved to the city in the early 1990s. Their parents worked in coalmines, construction sites, and factories. During the discussions, students shared stories of witnessing their family or friends getting taken advantage of by their employers. They talked about their worries for their parents’ health due to faulty workplace safety standards. Thus while the lecture materials were rather abstract, we always managed to relate them back to the present labor situation in China. The cruel reality was never far away.

At the end of the convention, every student had to pick one of two paths: 1) intern at a labor NGO or 2) sneak into a factory and work as a migrant for three weeks. The students would be trained over the weekend before heading out to their respective locations. They were instructed to keep a record of their observations and experiences, and to post it on online blogs, such as Weibo and Qzone.<sup>34</sup> Either choice would guarantee a rough path with

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<sup>34</sup> Qzone (QQ 空间) is a social networking website related to the QQ instant messaging software. It allows users to write blogs, keep diaries, send photos, listen to music, and watch

tremendous obstacles, but every student appeared determined and excited. The weeklong conference had undoubtedly inspired many. While these young migrants do not belong to the “second generation of migrants” demographic I have focused on, they nevertheless represent an integral part in the future of China’s labor activism.

The situation in China is changing rapidly. More and more people from different sectors of society are working together to fight for workers’ rights. Just as Peter Hessler, American author and journalist, who wrote three acclaimed books about China and numerous articles for *The New Yorker* and *National Geographic*, expressed in an interview:

*China will change, and I think it is inevitable. Every time I go back to China, I just feel people are so much aware. So many of them have sort of an idea of what’s going on outside of their country, they are able to travel, they are able to get more information about other places. They are getting other reference points. When I was living there, the only reference point was really the past. People would say it’s better than 10 years ago, or five years ago. It’s not strictly that way anymore. (Wan 2013)*

Over the past twenty years of rural to urban migration, there has been a fundamental shift toward a new kind of migrant subject who is younger, more informed, and more politically active. He Xiaobo is an example of the former who turned into an activist and is now working with local lawyers and professors to help other workers navigate China’s legal complexities. SACOM and CLB, both located in Hong Kong, support workers and act as a bridge that connects Mainland workers and NGOs with the international community. Finally, a new group of activists made up of young, educated peasants is emerging. Their dual understanding in both concrete life experiences and political philosophies allows for the possibility of bridging the gap between ideology and activism. By studying about rights in a more ideological sense, this group is developing their own language to describe their own experiences and views. There is an emergence of a new international visibility and rage that

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videos. As of November of 2013, Qzone had 623.3 million users, and 150 million of those users update their accounts at least once a month (Millward 2013).

are propelled by social networking and instant sharing of information. Social media, used to spread information, connect with migrant workers, and share grassroots experiences trans-regionally, is an integral part of battling for workers' rights. Labor activism is not a singular movement, but one that encompasses multiple levels of cooperation from a broad range of people.

## **Conclusion**

For decades, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has initiated numerous state-driven mass mobilizations to fulfill national economic advancements. In this sense, the Chinese government demonstrates an alarming capacity to cater the social regulations to its economic policies and produce the optimum domain for labor exploitation. The late 1970s economic reform led to state policies that simultaneously pushed peasants into the city to fulfill demands for cheap labor as well as subjected them to second-tier citizenship comprising social and political discriminations. This state-guided economic globalization and structural reform continues to require successive generations of rural migrant workers' cheap labor. They have become the mainstay of the country's export sector, but are unable to enjoy any of the benefits that come with China's economic advances. However, a new generation of migrants – children of the first wave of migrants, born after the 1980s – has entered the labor field. Compared to their parents, they are better educated, more aware of their rights, and more vocal about their demands. In fact, many of them are beginning to define and defend their rights through collective actions.

One crucial element in contemporary labor activism is information communication technologies (ICTs), specifically the Internet and the mobile phone. Technological development in the past two decades has been both liberating and constraining for the migrant population. With the development of the Internet and the mobile phone, China's labor activists (a disparate group comprising former migrant workers, current migrant workers, students, scholars, and lawyers) are sharing their knowledge and labor experiences across different regions of China. Technology has begun to play an integral role in grassroots activism. Beyond using mobile phones to staying in touch with family and friends, workers

are also utilizing technological devices to stay informed about labor news and information. Some even send text messages to organize protests or other mass-scale negotiations. Moreover, trans-regional and trans-national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are constantly collaborating and exchanging new strategies through ICTs. Labor activists and migrant workers have formed their own web of communication outside of the state system, breeding a new kind of migrant subject who is more active and more politicized. As a result, China has seen a crescendo of protests demanding economic rights and social equality, especially in coastal cities.

In recent years, more electronics factories have been moving westward to take advantage of the cheap land and labor in China's inland. For instance, while Sichuan used to have one of the highest emigration rates for peasants, now for the first time many of its citizens are returning home to work in the city of Chengdu. Zhang Huijie, the woman I interviewed in the Pixian Foxconn plant in Sichuan, is one of many migrant workers who are choosing to migrate to urban Sichuan rather than to another province. Despite this shift, strategies developed in the coastal regions to organize workers have yet to be showcased in the factories of Western China. Could the increase in returning emigrants who have been exposed to various strategies of disruption, cause a new wave of protest in inland factories? Could this counter-migration bring about new avenues of information exchange and empowerment? Insights into these questions will determine more about present cultural shifts and provide new avenues for research.

However, despite China's systemic injustice organized around the capitalist principle of profit before people, the emergence in grassroots networking proves hopeful in bringing about social change. This new sense of possibility combined with years of ill treatment is



cooking up a dangerous anger that is troubling but is also promising. The current situation is breeding a new subject, growing more organized and consequentially more powerful with each new protest. The migrant laborers are using the very technology they are physically assembling in factories to advocate for their own rights. The labor scene is changing, and circumstances are lining up for deeper structural shifts that will alter the dynamics labor politics not only in China, but all around the world through the global supply chain. China is a sine qua non in this chain, manufacturing products that are exported all around the world. Thus from even across the globe, we have a moral responsibility to these workers who make the products we use daily. Behind each statistic is a story, a reality, a life. And overwhelmingly, this story's protagonist consists of a displaced laborer paying the price for the low prices we see in our market.

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